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REAL EDUCATION

varieties of freedom

David Gribble

Libertarian Education

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To the many people of all ages who have helped me to write about their schools, this book is dedicated with gratitude and affection.

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My thanks are also due to Eriko Fulford, for translation from the Japanese, and Maria Knowlton, for help with Spanish.

David Gribble

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Introduction

I first encountered an alternative to conventional education when I was twenty-six, having already found much to object to in the school where I was teaching. One day when I was browsing in a bookshop I came across a description of Dartington Hall School, which seemed to answer all my objections. Within a year I was teaching there.

Almost thirty years later, when Dartington Hall School closed, a group of the children and staff, of whom I was one, started Sands School, which had even more radical principles. I worked there for five years until I reached the age of sixty.

For all those years, I had been searching for an ideal system of education. Teaching is such a demanding occupation that I had to concentrate my attention on the school I was working in, usually trying to solve problems rather than to develop new ideas. It was not until after I had retired that I began to realise how much there was to learn from other schools, all round the world, that shared the same principles and ideals but had found different ways of putting them into practice.

In conventional schools children are literally prisoners: the law keeps them in. Learning according to inclination is not an option; children's inclinations are not considered relevant; adults tell them what they must learn. They make the best of it and enjoy themselves as much as they can, but they are always under someone else's authority, unable to conduct themselves as they would wish, unable to follow up their own interests. School seems to be designed to destroy their individuality, to turn them all, as the Swiss teacher Jürg Jegge says, into cogwheels that will fit smoothly into the machinery of society.

Governments cannot make schools ideal merely by altering the amount of topic work or testing children more often or buying more computers or improving the staff-student ratio. The ideal school must have an entirely different atmosphere. It must not even try to manufacture cogs.

Dan Greenberg, of Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, has commented that when compulsory education was introduced in the nineteenth century, parents objected because it prevented their children from learning anything useful. They wanted their children at home, observing and helping adults at work, learning the things that they would need in the future. Time directed by a teacher was time wasted.

Nowadays people seem to believe the opposite - for children, time not directed by a teacher is time wasted. The pendulum has swung too far.

Educationists have become so fascinated by the concept of teaching that they have forgotten to consider what children actually need to learn.

Ideal school-leavers would be literate and numerate, of course, but they would also be happy, considerate, honest, enthusiastic, tolerant, self-confident, well-informed, articulate, practical, co-operative, flexible, creative, individual, determined people who knew what their talents and interests were, had enjoyed developing them, and intended to make good use of them. They would be people who cared for others because they had been cared for themselves.

Conventional school organisation seems designed to produce superficially competent people who, underneath, are evasive, self-interested, ruthless, frustrated, cautious, obedient, timid conformists; they will be complacent about approved achievements and easily humiliated by public failure; they will have spent so much time at school struggling to acquire knowledge that does not interest them and skills that are irrelevant to them that they will probably have lost all confidence in the value of their own true interests and talents. They will be people who don't care much about others, because most other people have never seemed to care much about them.

The school curriculum is supposed to equip young people for life. If you think back to yourself as a school-leaver, do you see yourself as having been equipped for life? Do you see yourself as having been a knowledgeable person even within the narrow limits of the subjects that you studied in classes? Since you embarked on your adult career, have you not in fact forgotten most of what you were taught? How are you now on the periodic table, long division, Chaucerian English? I would suggest that the lesson that you remember most clearly from all those years in school is simply the importance of doing what is expected of you, the importance of fulfilling a proper function as a cog.

All over the world there are conventional schools that ignore children's curiosity, suppress their energy and over-rule their generous moral impulses. And all over the world, as I have at last discovered, there are people who have seen the damage that this does, and have set up schools that are different. Eighteen of these schools are the subject-matter of this book. They are schools which decline to train children to become cogs, and indeed help children who have been so trained to lose their coggishness.

In all of these schools the adults have a fundamental respect for the children and believe it is right to allow them to develop naturally as themselves. Children are not seen as clay to be moulded or pots to be filled; they are not regarded as trainee adults, but as people, just like anybody else.

It follows that it would have been inappropriate to rely principally on the teachers for my information. The views of current or former students (or sometimes both), are included in the description of almost every school.

The schools are arranged in historical order, by the date of foundation. For chapters seven and twelve the dates of the first schools to be founded have been used. I have visited all the schools except for Neel Bagh and the Kleingruppe Lufingen. In most I spent at least a week.

I chose the schools because I knew them, was impressed by them and felt them to be sufficiently distinctive to warrant separate description, or because what I had heard or read of them promised interest and surprises. I was not disappointed. The first entry in my diary for one of my last visits begins "Astonished all over again."



1 Summerhill

Summerhill is the oldest and the most famous of the schools in this book. It is also the most notorious. Everyone who has heard of Summerhill has an opinion of it, or at least has an opinion about what he or she believes Summerhill stands for. It seems to be impossible to approach the school without prejudice, one way or the other.

For that reason it is particularly important to describe the school as it was and as it is. A. S. Neill, the founder and for almost fifty years the head, enjoyed provoking controversy; to discover and understand the actual atmosphere of the school we cannot rely on his proud but curiously petulant books about it. He was inclined to refer to the children at Summerhill as "my brats", to describe the difficulties of coping with "the gangster age" and to complain about continual interruptions from children and visitors. He loved to tell anecdotes about how he had paid a child for stealing, or found children on a nocturnal larder-raid and joined in the raid himself. He believed he had a mission, and indeed he had, but he over-estimated his own importance within his own school, and even feared that it might close when he died. Summerhill had traditions that preserved it while Neill was still headmaster when he was over eighty, tired and ill; those traditions have been strong enough to preserve it with extraordinarily little change for over twenty years since his death.

Neill used to say that Summerhill was founded in 1921, but the international school that he started as part of the Dalcroze Schule of Hellerau was not really Summerhill. The real Summerhill started at Lyme Regis in 1924 when Neill and Lilian Neustatter arrived in a house of that name with five pupils. *New Era*, the progressive education magazine, announced that they were looking for "boys and girls that other schools find troublesome, lazy, dull, antisocial." He had, he wrote himself in *Hearts not Heads in the School*, "the attitude of an enthusiastic tyro who thought that the new young psychology was a grown god: [he] cheerfully believed that psychology had no boundaries, and took in, not only thieves but also injury-at-birth cases, misborn children, children who walked sideways." The school grew. In 1927 he and Lilian got married, and the school moved to Leiston, in Suffolk, with 27 pupils. There it has remained until the present day, apart from five years during the war, when it took refuge at Ffestiniog in North Wales.

The house, that was bought for them by a benefactor interested in Neill's ideas, is on the outskirts of a small town, in its own grounds of eleven acres. It had been a Victorian family home, and when you approach it, it seems

surprisingly unimpressive - still a slightly down-at-heel family house with an ill-tended garden. There does not seem to be room for seventy-five children, and indeed there is not, because most of the classrooms and living spaces are in caravans, cottages and temporary buildings behind the house and around a large open play-space to one side.

The idea that the school was primarily for problem children was soon dropped; it was to be simply an ideal school for anyone whose parents could afford it. (Fees were kept as low as possible, in part by relying on idealistic staff to accept low salaries, but even so they turned out to be too high for many of the parents whose children joined the school, and there were frequent financial difficulties). Children were to be released from the tyranny of the family, to escape the dangers of Oedipal conflict, to lose any fear of the paternal authority-figure and to be reassured that there was nothing wrong with masturbation. Lessons were to be voluntary and children were to be allowed to use their time as they saw fit, without adult intervention. The system of government was to be through a school meeting, where children and staff would have equal voting rights.

Neill believed that children should be required to accept regulation regarding bodily health, that is to say rules concerning food, warm clothing and bed-times, but that no requirements should be made about either psychic health or learning, where all decisions should be left to the individual child. These beliefs sometimes ran counter to decisions of the school meeting; as well as making any number of rules about social behaviour, it would also from time to time repeal all bed-time rules, until the ill-effects became obvious and the rules had to be re-established. Such tampering with his original ideals Neill allowed, and indeed probably came to appreciate.

By 1934 there were 70 pupils between the ages of three and eighteen. Neill wrote an account of the school for the *Modern Schools Handbook*. It included this passage:

The belief behind the Summerhill system is that education must concern itself primarily with the instinctive side of the child. The Unconscious is infinitely more important than the Conscious Mind. Our theory, then, is that the child must be free to express itself in the manner that its driving force demands. We may call that driving force the Id, the Unconscious, the Life Force, what we will. It is a force that will find an outlet for its energy in one way or another. If left free, it will express itself in love and creation; if suppressed, it will find a way out in destruction, hate, illness of soul and body.

For as long as the school has existed, the public has ignored the self-government which is at the heart of the school, and chosen to be



scandalised by four comparatively trivial things: the children call the staff by their first names; they are allowed to swear and most do, casually and without malice; they are allowed to smoke, though few do, and they may bathe in the nude. Within the school these things have always been taken completely for granted, even though nowadays smoking is always under discussion for health reasons.

In seventy years, the basic principles of the school have changed very little. There is no longer the original interest in psychology that Neill had acquired firstly from Homer Lane's work with delinquent children, then from his own analysis with Wilhelm Stekel and finally from his friendship with Wilhelm Reich. When the school began, he gave therapy sessions, known as Private Lessons, or PLs, but when he found that children seemed to be restored to psychic health at Summerhill whether they had PLs or not, he gradually abandoned them.

Lilian died in 1944 and in 1945 Neill married Ena Wood, who eventually took over the school when he died. She ran it from 1973 to 1985, when their daughter Zoe Readhead took over.

Because of the difficulties experienced by many older children who arrived at Summerhill after years of conventional education, the school no longer takes in new pupils older than eleven. When it started, it took boarders as young as three, and they could stay till they were eighteen. Now the youngest boarder is six, and pupils leave at sixteen.

Numbers in the school have fluctuated wildly. During the war the school had 70 pupils and a waiting list, but by 1959 there were only 17 pupils. Then Neill's book, *Summerhill*, was published in the United States and by 1968 the school was back up to 60, of whom 45 were from America. In the 80s the American contingent shrank and was replaced by Japanese children. Of the 75 students in 1994, roughly a third were Japanese, a third British, and a third from other countries.

The Neill anecdotes that once seemed to give the flavour of the school are no longer important. Maybe he encouraged children to break rules, told someone threatening to jump from a high window to go ahead and jump, helped pelt a garage door with gravel when he had only just painted it, but there doesn't have to be someone at Summerhill behaving like that for it to remain Summerhill.

Ex-pupils include university professors, doctors, engineers, teachers, painters and writers. If the object of education is to give people the opportunity to take up such careers, in these cases Summerhill has succeeded, but from a Summerhill point of view that is not particularly important. What matters is that ex-pupils should be fulfilled in their careers, and a contented lorry-driver is seen as a greater credit to the school than a miserable surgeon.

The national inspectorate has generally managed to find enough good in the school, even in its own terms, to award it recognition. The media, on the other hand, have preferred to present it as an obscene chaos. The most recent disaster was the Channel 4 film shown in the spring of 1993, a film made by people who had spent half a term as guests of the school and had appeared to appreciate it. For the broadcast they selected all the most sensational incidents of their half-term - and what school would not dread the publication of all the most sensational incidents from any half-term - and presented them with what appeared to be deliberate malice. They showed the school meeting voting to abolish bed-times, and they showed the resulting exhaustion, but they failed to say that bed-times were later reinstituted by a community that fully understood their importance. They showed a boy killing a rabbit, but allowed the fact that the rabbit had myxomatosis and needed to be put down to pass almost imperceptibly. They showed shots of boys making bows and arrows intercut with shots of a cat climbing in the bushes; Summerhill children don't shoot at cats. There was a lot about a particular new child who was finding it very hard to adapt to the school, and the attempts of an older child to look after him were somehow presented so as to suggest that children at the school were generally unhappy and neglected. There was a concentration on the "gangster age". If the film-makers had only wanted to make a film about children killing animals they might have done better to seek out adolescent boys from the local community; many country boys are taught to kill rabbits as a matter of course.

The apparent determination of outsiders to associate freedom with blunders and cruelty is all the more extraordinary in that blunders and cruelty are far more often the result of repression. Most bullying occurs in schools where the staff use violent punishment. Accidents are more likely in a supervised games session, where adults require children to perform, than in free play, where children decide for themselves what they think they are capable of. The conventional misapprehension must be due to a conviction that adults know better than children about everything, even matters that concern only childhood - a conviction so strong that it overrides all the evidence. Most of the schools in this book have been criticised at one time or another for what people believe must happen there rather than for what actually does happen.

To form an opinion of a school like Summerhill you have to drop all adult preconceptions and imagine yourself as you were as a school-child, and to think how you would have used the freedom yourself. Was all that homework you did at school really worth it, or would you have been just as good a person, maybe even a better person, if you had been allowed to use your childhood to grow up in your own particular way?

The early years of Summerhill were the years when Arthur Ransome was writing the *Swallows and Amazons* books. School is barely mentioned in them except as the end of adventure, a totally different and irrelevant world. Adults only play small parts, either as providers of food and equipment or as hostile natives who the Swallows and Amazons seek to avoid. Only Captain Flint, the bachelor uncle who plays along with the adventurers on their own terms, is ever given an important role to play. The Swallows generally have no parents around; they are boarded out at a farm for the holidays. The Amazons' mother is treated by her daughters with indifferent condescension. The children do whatever they like.

And what do they like? Sailing, camping, exploring, imaginative games. These are not stories about children outwitting international spies and bringing them to justice, they are stories about children who are left free to play as they like in a real environment, and in the course of that play meet real situations that they have to cope with on their own. There is no deliberate educational content to the books, in spite of detailed accounts of how to light a fire or make a home-made photographic flash or recognise different kinds of bird. The children in the stories are not setting out to educate themselves, even though they may read Hakluyt or study the stars at night or learn semaphore and the Morse code. They are doing what interests them, and in the course of doing so they are learning. They learn to sail, and to cook, and to tie knots, and to swim, and to read maps, and to forecast the weather. In winter, when it is more difficult to go out and entertain themselves, they make up giant adventure stories together, like *Missee Lee* and *Peter Duck*.

And if they had been real, when they did go to school - I know this for I went to school myself not long afterwards - they would have had to learn Latin, and the dates of the Kings and Queens of England, and at the age of eight they would have had to spend a whole year studying the first two pages of *Madame Souris*. I still know the dates of the Kings and Queens of England as far as William II - "William the Conqueror, 1066 to 1087, William II, 1087 to 1100." I don't think that even at my best I ever knew more than the first six or seven.

At Summerhill you didn't learn the sorts of thing that I tried to learn in my lessons. You learnt the sorts of thing that I learnt, if I learnt them at all, in my free time. Osbert Sitwell said that his education took place during the holidays from Eton. If you went to Summerhill you could get educated during the term as well.

The *Swallows and Amazons* books were enormously popular. Those children who enjoyed them recognised in them accounts of a kind of life they would love to be allowed to lead. Adults approved of the books because they were well-written, exciting stories, and they enjoyed reading them themselves. And yet it did not seem to occur to them that perhaps learning Latin and day

after day sitting at desks dreaming of the holidays was not the best way of spending more than half the year.

I dare say that Summerhill would be horrified to find itself compared to the world of the Swallows and Amazons, but there are two more important similarities besides the independence of learning. Firstly, the children in the books kept, as far as possible, aloof from adults, even though they depended on them for supplies and shelter. Summerhill is run on much the same pattern: domestic staff prepare the food and keep the place clean, and the Neill family (or later the Readhead family) see to the building and the administration. The children are left to follow their own concerns without having to cope with anxieties that properly belong to the adults. Secondly, in both environments, in the real one of Summerhill and in Arthur Ransome's fictitious one, the children rely on their own moral sense to guide them about questions of right and wrong, and in both environments the standards they set are extremely high.

Because Neill wrote so often about children with problems who overcame those problems when they came to Summerhill, it is difficult to imagine what the school was like for children like you and me, dear reader, who were well-adjusted and well-behaved and made our ways satisfactorily through conventional education. We who never threw gravel at newly-painted doors might perhaps have been confused in the company of those who did.

One moment. We who never threw gravel at newly-painted doors? Perhaps not, but we almost certainly did things that were equally idiotic. I don't like to remember them. The memories are imbued with shame and fear. But supposing we had been rather young, and had thrown gravel at wet paint, and seen how entertainingly it stuck (or what interesting marks it made - I have never done it and I don't know what happens), would we not have felt enormously better about it if the man who had just painted it came and joined in, and then afterwards invited us to help clear up the mess and paint the door again? Children are so often punished or reproved for acts that are not malicious but simply mistakes. The result is that for the rest of our lives those early mistakes, and, because of that early experience, also mistakes we make later, fill us with shame, no matter how good our motives may have been. One of the pupils at Summerhill in 1980, interviewed by the magazine *Lib ED*, considered the avoidance of this kind of shame to be one of the great virtues of the school; "You learn here by asking questions," he said. "Summerhill lets you do that. I learnt a lot from making mistakes, too. You can even do that here, without feeling stupid."

Let me imagine myself, aged about ten, having left the grey flannel shirts and grey flannel shorts and long woollen socks with the school colours round the top, and the shiny polished black walking shoes, and the tie in the school

colours, and the grey pullover with the school colours round the v-neck, and the school cap, and having turned up at Summerhill.

I would be wearing my ordinary holiday clothes, which would be reassuring.

One of the first difficulties would be finding that there were grown-ups there who expected you to call them by their first names. For some days, maybe even a week or two, I would find myself calling the men "sir" and being afraid to call the women anything, because I had been taught to call the women Miss or Mrs. So-and-so, and I didn't know any of the teachers' surnames. And I would have been scandalised by the swearing.

Adults who are shocked by children swearing usually don't stay long enough to realise that it is little more than a kind of school slang, a proof of belonging. Children who feel confident of their position in the school have no need to prove it in this way. The only trouble with swearing is that it upsets people; if you are with people who are not upset by it, it is harmless. Most children realise that there are plenty of situations in which swearing is best avoided. Adults are often amused by very small children swearing - a four-year-old, perhaps, saying "Oh, these fucking shoe-laces!" - because it seems gloriously inappropriate, but in a few years they will find the same remark deeply disturbing. What can be deeply disturbing about swearing is the hatred or despair that it often expresses, but when it is used merely as a mild expletive, or even as a signal of potential friendship, there is little wrong with it except for the inarticulacy it betrays.

As a child I would probably never have accepted the swearing. I would have put up with it, but I would have tried to avoid it myself, as I did at Eton, where swearing was forbidden, but almost everybody swore frequently when out of earshot of the staff. I can imagine that at Summerhill such an inhibition might well have bothered the staff a little, not because they preferred children to swear, but because of the repression it stood for. Perhaps I would have indulged in a month or two of continual obscenity, and then returned to a more balanced restraint.

At first I would probably have been shy of addressing teachers by their first names, but very soon the pleasure of being able to speak to a teacher naturally, as a friend, would soon have banished the embarrassment, because not only would I have been able to speak to the teachers with informal friendliness, but they would have responded in the same way. There would certainly have been some I became extremely fond of, and affection is a more productive relationship than fear.

And lessons? I think I would have gone to lessons. I enjoyed learning, for the most part, as long as I was not resisting compulsion, and in a school where I was allowed to drop the subjects that bored me, I would probably have been keen to give extra energy to those I liked.

I have written this hypothetical passage about how I feel I might have reacted to Summerhill myself to encourage you to try imagining how it would have suited you.

Far too much has been written about Summerhill by people who have only visited it, or by people who have only experienced it as adults, and I would include Neill himself in that category. Now I find myself writing too much. The next few pages are something different. They are not hypothetical and they are written by someone who knew the school from the inside, as a pupil. This is not what the school might have been like, it is not what the school looked like from an adult point of view, it is what the school really was like for one particular child, Hylda Sims, who was there in the 1940s. This account first appeared in the Friends of Summerhill Trust Journal for Christmas 1993.

Summerhill was the most important five years of my life, as close to the bone as who your mother and father were, having a round face and being a girl. The 22 schools I attended before being sent to Summerhill leave only fragments in my memory. One was a primary school in Norwich with a teacher called Miss Tench who shouted a lot. We had to sit quietly in our desks and she held up a pin in front of the class and said she wanted to hear it drop. When the air raid siren wailed, she marched us brusquely across the asphalt and by the time it had risen to a shriek we were sitting in silence again along the dank walls of a concrete bunker, though I don't think she still had the pin. After a very long time a shrill high note sounded and she marched us back again. It was scripture by then so she told us about God in her loud voice. Then we had to drink our milk. After that we got ten minutes peace because it was playtime.

Maybe this sort of thing gave me my permanent fear of enclosed spaces, my dislike of bossy people and my suspicion about God's agents on earth and milk. But at Summerhill I created my view of myself and the world, and it has been my yardstick.

I had been to 22 schools because my father was an itinerant market trader and we moved around the country living in a caravan which he built over our heads. When the war came this rambling life had to stop and my parents settled in Norwich. They were communists and they took words like freedom and equality literally. They wanted me to go to a school where people didn't say "no". They felt Summerhill would be a free and equal "yes" school. It had been evacuated to North Wales at that time and they saw it as a safe haven from both Hitler and Miss Tench. It was.

Summerhill had a waiting list, but my parents lent our redundant caravan to the school so they could find bedspace for three more pupils. My father drove up to Llan Ffestiniog in the big square Citroen with the caravan dragging and swaying behind as we climbed the steep Welsh hills. It was a perfect summer day. Butterflies, dragonflies and sheep were everywhere and clumps of scarlet rhododendrons overhung the winding roads.

The house belonged to a Lord Newborough and was built half way down a valley facing three mountain peaks - Molwyn, Molwyn Fach and Molwyn Bach. There was a long paved area at the front and two sets of steps grandly leading down to terraced lawns. In the middle of one of these was a disused and empty swimming pool and, overhanging from the top terrace to the lower, a big tree with a rope swing fixed to its fork. To the left of the house was craggy wooded land and the pieces of climbable rock that jutted out from among the trees had glittering bits of quartz on their surfaces. You walked up a steep path behind the house to get to the village. The property there was bounded by a gate with a huge piece of slate hanging from it so that it clamped behind you.

It was a great relief to see the back of my parents, having paid the usual lip service to all their anxious advice, and to get on with the important business of exploring the territory and getting to know the other kids. Quite quickly I got used to the idea that, unlike everywhere else I'd been, the adults didn't stop you doing this, and though they were quite friendly and even made jokes, they mostly minded their own business and let us mind ours. Pretty soon we found out who our favourite adults were and liked to sit around in their rooms in the evenings talking and drinking cocoa.

The biggest problem I had in the first term was modesty. This word was used at Summerhill only in the sense of being shy of being seen without your clothes on. People said "She's modest," and laughed, not unkindly but somewhat mockingly when you got dressed and undressed in bed. The first time I saw a little boy take all his clothes off and stand nonchalantly putting his pyjamas on I rushed off giggling to shock someone with the story. The response was a puzzled "So what?" I had great difficulty taking a bath because the bathrooms, being the warmest and most intimate spaces in the house, were social meeting places. A boy called Michael would watch any approach I made to the bathroom and rush in after me daring me to get on with my bath. He was blond and elegant and I was half in love with him and this made it worse. Perhaps this cynical reaction on the part of the other kids cured me. By my second term I was holding court in the bath and laughing with the rest to see the latest arrivals struggling to get in and out of their clothes underneath towels and blankets and going without baths for weeks.

I didn't notice Neill for a long time, and was surprised to learn that he was the old man I had often seen patiently raking leaves at the side of the house. Neill sometimes asked kids to have PL's with him. These "private" or "psychology" lessons were therapy sessions which he gave to kids who he felt needed them. I had heard that he asked stupid questions like "Do you envy your brother's penis?" or "Do you think you are really a princess who was left on your parents' doorstep as a baby?" My friend Winnie had a PL every week and seemed to enjoy them. I felt a bit jealous but Winnie said you had only to ask and he would give you one. So I asked. I went to Neill's room for my PL one Friday morning. Neill was sitting comfortably in his big armchair and motioned me to another. He said nothing. Neither did I. I waited. He

waited too. Nothing happened. After a while he lit his pipe, put the matches on the arm of his chair, picked up the newspaper from a nearby table, opened it out and disappeared behind it. I sat waiting and watching. He carried on reading. I became increasingly impatient.

"Aren't you going to ask me some questions?" I asked, peeved.

"Nope."

He turned on to the next page and I could hear the juicy sucking noise of his pipe. A thin cloud of smoke floated above the *Times*. On impulse I grabbed the matches, lit one and set fire to the corner of the newspaper. Without haste he lowered it to the floor and placed his large square toe over the flame, reducing that part of the paper to blackened ash. "Good," he said, "I didn't think you had the guts to do that. Wish you'd chosen the other corner though - I hadn't quite finished that crossword."

We thought Neill had a rather feeble sense of humour. He made foolish proposals in the meeting sometimes which we normally voted down. One meeting he said he thought we were all tired of running the school democratically, and so he was going to try having a dictatorship like in Germany. So a triumvirate of dictators was selected by him from among the older boys to be in charge. We very soon got fed up with them going to the front of the dinner queue, declaring early bedtimes for everybody but themselves and ordering us about. They couldn't think of much else to do. We called a special meeting and voted them out of office. They stepped down without putting up a fight. They too had had enough.

After this a pupil who was interested in politics suggested in the meeting that we should run things like they did in parliament, with a government and an opposition. We had an election and my side won. I became a member of the cabinet as Minister of Social Affairs and had to organise things to do in the evenings. After a while we got fed up with parliamentary government and reverted to our usual open, one person one vote system.

The Saturday self-government meeting, with its majority voting system, its termly elected secretary and its rotating chairperson survives at Summerhill with very few changes today as if it is the natural way for children to run things. A constant topic in meetings was bedtimes - when they should be and how they should be enforced. Sometimes we abandoned bedtimes altogether but this never worked and the younger ones particularly would become dazed and pale with tiredness after two or three days. A big boy of gentle but firm disposition called Bunny Leff took on the task of getting us to bed and was so successful at it that he became the sole bedtimes officer for many terms. He would go round ringing the dinner bell and shouting "Eight o'clock bedtimes" and so on. For some reason we stopped whatever we were doing and took ourselves meekly off to bed. This was probably the only time in the history of Summerhill when bedtimes weren't a problem.

I was quite clever despite, or because of, my many previous schools and was put in a class of about 8 other kids who were mostly a bit older than me. We had lessons in the mornings and I usually went to them unless I had

something better to do. Neill taught us maths and sometimes English. We had on the staff a number of European refugees and they taught us French and German. For the first few weeks I made a fool of myself by forgetting where I was and behaving like we used to do in other schools. A question would be asked, and I'd suddenly shoot my arm up as if I'd been bitten by a snake and start bouncing up and down in my seat shouting "Miss, Miss!" or "Sir, Sir!" I'd forgotten in my anxiety to be first with the answer that the teacher was called Nina or Robin and nobody was going to pat you on the head or give you a silver star for knowing where Timbuktoo was. I soon learned that the only time you put your hand up at Summerhill was when you wanted to say something in the Saturday night meeting. This was held each week to decide the rules of the school and what to do about those who broke them. You also raised your hand to register your vote, and everybody's vote counted for one.

In the afternoons we would go to the art room, sit around talking in our rooms, go exploring in the hills and wooded valleys near the school or go up to the village. The art room had a tortoise stove in the middle of it and it was a great place to congregate on cold days. In the evenings there would be dancing or games in the lounge or Neill would do spontaneous acting - sort of drama improvisation workshops.

Crazes went by seasons. In summer we organised vast games of prisoners in the grounds, sometimes by moonlight, in which the whole school took part. We made all sorts of strange swings in the front of the house from bits of junk - old bed frames, chairs and bits of rope. We lay in the empty swimming pool sunbathing and watching small green lizards darting over its hot flaky concrete sides. On really hot evenings we held meetings there and then slept in the grounds wrapped in our bedsheets. Sometimes groups of us would trek up Molwyn and camp overnight by the lake just below the summit. In winter we made huge long ice slides down the hill beside the school and went tobogganing.

We used to have crazes for making things. The first year I was there people made sandals. Some were made by cutting foot-shaped pieces of wood out in the workshop, sawing off the toe end, joining it together again with a hinge and then tacking bits of scrap leather on the tops to put your foot through. In Ulla's sewing class we made rope sandals by coiling pieces of rope, sewing the coils together on the inside to form the sole and sewing on fabric tops. In a climate like Wales the wooden ones were better, for every time it rained the rope ones became floppy and heavy and gathered crusts of mud.

Table tennis was a constant craze and I got quite good. In summer we tramped off to a sloping field about a mile from the school with Corky our science teacher and played hockey. Both hockey and football were played without much sense of competition and games included all ages, both sexes and staff and pupils. We went swimming in a natural pool in one of the fast flowing rivers nearby. You could stand on a big flat rock directly under

another big flat rock and the water would cascade down in front of you like liquid diamonds covering you with a fine cold spray.

Kids who'd been at Summerhill before the war used to pine for Leiston where you could cycle. They remembered Leiston as having constant sun and endless space. Neill hated Wales with its excess of rain and its puritan chapel-going culture, but I loved it. In Llan there were three fish and chip shops and you could get scallops - flat rings of potato fried in batter - and fizzy lemonade into which they put shots of bright pink raspberry flavouring for an extra ha'penny. In Blaenau you could get set teas in the front parlours of respectable Welsh widows and then go and watch the Marx Brothers or Rita Hayworth. You could go on trips to the exotic gardens of Port Meirion and then run across a huge expanse of warm wavy sand to a friendly sea. The war was distant and nobody worried if there were chinks of light round the black curtains.

When we got back to Leiston we made blackout skirts out of these curtains in Ulla's class and decorated them round the bottom with coloured rick rack braid. But Leiston in general was a big disappointment to me. The army had lived in the house in our absence and everything was painted a dingy shade of khaki. The village was drab, only two inferior chip shops and not a mountain to be seen in all that dull Suffolk countryside. We went bathing at Sizewell close to a small power station. There were large areas of duneland fenced off with barbed wire because of unexploded mines, and sticking out from the menacing grey sea were huge girders known as dragon's teeth which had been planted there against the threat of invasion.

However I was getting older and taking part in a lot of things. With two other kids I wrote a serial "radio" play, which we performed every Thursday evening behind a sheet in the theatre and in which I had a big part. A few very good teachers who had been connected with the school before the war reappeared. Leslie Morton, a famous Marxist historian, taught us history, and his wife Vivienne taught us English. With them we did a production of Macbeth. Winnie and I both auditioned for the part of Lady Macbeth, and I didn't really mind when she got the part and I had to be her understudy and the first witch. I got a boy friend, Rusty, one of the best looking and most talented boys in the school.

And then the next term I was elected to the end of term committee. The end of term committee was elected by the meeting just after half term. Its purpose was to collect the money and make all the arrangements for the end of term dance which was the big event of every term and took place on the last Saturday. First there would be plays written and performed by the kids and staff in the theatre in the early evening and then the lounge which had been decorated by the end of term committee would open for the dance. The EOTC would choose a theme which was kept a secret and the lounge was closed to all but the EOTC while it was being decorated, and so when you entered the lounge after walking over from the theatre you would find it had been magically transformed to, for instance, Aladdin's Cave or a desert

island. Up in the corner of the lounge was the gram box, and each end of term we would add to our collection of records. This was the responsibility of the EOTC and the gram committee. We were very keen on jazz and did our own Summerhill version of ballroom dancing to Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Nellie Lutcher and Louis Armstrong's Hot Seven. Neill thought that a liking for jazz was evidence of a farting complex so the gram committee would let him have one of his syrupy swing records every so often, when he'd get up and dance with one of the kids, doing an eccentric slow quickstep with his big feet turned in, stooped over his little partner holding her arm out in the traditional pump handle. Half way through the dance there'd be a floor show, sometimes a ballet choreographed by the older girls, and after that refreshments - sausage rolls, cakes and tarts which had been made by the EOTC the night before. In the dance itself there'd be competitions - elimination dances, musical chairs, statues and Neill's competition during which he'd ask questions, often humorous, and if you didn't know the answer you had to get off the floor. There would be prizes for all the competitions and the EOTC went to Ipswich on the train to get those and the balloons and the new records.

To do everything properly - the prizes, the records, the decorations, the refreshments - we needed a lot of money, so we would spend the run-up to end of term organising all sorts of fund-raising events - jumble sales, raffles, a collection from the staff, visitors and parents, and we'd make things in the workshop. There were always quite a lot of people on the EOTC, maybe about twelve, and there was a policy of including little kids, older kids and staff. The art teacher and the good painters, of which there were many, were always involved.

Before the lounge was opened we'd polish the floor. This meant putting a thick layer of polish on, wrapping your feet up in old rags and skating over it until all the polish was absorbed and it was shiny.

We older girls didn't come into the lounge until at least half an hour after the dance had started. The early bit was for kids and visitors who didn't know any better. We liked to make our entrance down the front stairs when things had got started, wearing the dazzling creations we'd been making all term in Ulla's.

End of term was pure happiness and even if you'd just split up with a boy friend it was a good opportunity to find another. The only problem was you all had to go home the next day, and home was never as much fun as school.

At the end of the dance, the people who were leaving that term would go into the middle and we'd link arms round them and sing Auld Lang Syne. Then we would hug and kiss the leavers and cry a bit.

Neill has said that the "absence of fear is the best thing that can happen to a child." Of course there are always things and people to fear, even at Summerhill, and sometimes for no definable reason. I was afraid of the dark and trees falling on me. However not to be ruled by fear is a great boon and rare in schools. When he speaks of abolishing "the chasm between old and

young" Neill pinpoints the important difference between Summerhill and other places.

I remember that when I was at home my mother's adult friends would glance at you and say "She's grown, hasn't she."

The more perspicacious ones would address you directly, but in a specially modulated voice - "Haven't you grown!"

My toes would curl with embarrassment at these sort of remarks even at a very young age so I would blush, look down or hide behind my mother. This would be a signal for them to deliver the final insult: "Isn't she shy!" If you didn't hide but you gave some verbal response they would laugh even though you had said nothing funny, as if the voice of this talking doll was a joke in itself.

At school people like Miss Tench had their own version of what was good for you which rarely coincided with your own.

Adults at Summerhill were not like this. They spoke to you as one human being to another, didn't laugh unless they thought the joke was funny and always listened to the content of what you said. They didn't think what you ought to be doing was any different from what you were doing. They were neither God nor the Devil so we didn't have to respect, propitiate, challenge or destroy them. Released from unhealthy preoccupation with what adults were thinking and doing about me, I absorbed myself with intense enjoyment in the day to day living of my life.

Summerhill may seem odd to most people because they have such different memories of school. Summerhill seems normal and sensible to me, and I wonder why all schools are not run on much the same lines.

Don't you wish you had been there? And, curiously, don't you see how closely it resembles the childhood paradise represented in the Arthur Ransome books? "The adults ... mostly minded their own business, and we minded ours." Playing games out of doors by moonlight, building swings out of junk, sleeping out at night, watching lizards, constructing ice slides, exploring the mountains, swimming in the river, making sandals, they are all just what the Swallows and Amazons did or might have done. What was different about Summerhill was that it was richer: at Summerhill there were also parties and plays and music and boy-friends and organised self-government. And lessons, which the Swallows and Amazons had too, but for them they happened in a horribly different world called school.

Summerhill prides itself on not having changed. In the 1990s there is still the same atmosphere of freedom and happiness. How is it created?

Summerhill is not a world where children do whatever they like. There is a regular framework to the day with meal-times, getting-up times, bedtimes and lesson times (though the latter are optional). There are also large numbers of

rules, and those who break the rules may well be punished, for instance by being deprived of pudding, having to pay a fine or being sentenced to extra work in the grounds. The difference is that the rules are made by the school meeting, and the punishments are decided by the school meeting. Almost the whole school attends, so the children are in a huge majority. The authority is emphatically not in the hands of the adults.

If an adult has a problem with a child, it has to be taken to the school meeting. During one of my visits there, one boy refused to wash up his own equipment after a cookery lesson. The teacher in charge was new, and did not know how to handle the situation. He was told to bring it up at the school meeting, which he duly did, and there was considerable discussion. Should the culprit be banned from cookery for the rest of the term, or banned until he washed his stuff up, or sentenced to washing everybody else's equipment at the next cookery session? Should the teacher or someone else do the washing up if he failed to turn up for cookery again? Should he have to pay whoever washed up for him? I don't remember the final sentence, but the discussion was absolutely sensible, and the adults' voices carried no more weight than the children's.

In my head I hear teachers deriding the length of the procedure. They have no time to bring someone up at a meeting just for failing to do a bit of washing up. They need immediate authority to solve the problem, which is after all a very minor one. If every little misdemeanour has to be brought to the school meeting, you will spend your whole time dealing with little misdemeanours. To think like this is to overlook the fact that at Summerhill conflicts between children and teachers are extremely rare. Children see staff generally as their friends, and this relationship results in a cooperation which removes almost all disciplinary difficulties. When you consider that, on top of that, the only children in a class are the ones who have chosen to be there, you can see that disruption is very unlikely. If disruption does occur, the teacher does not impose a punishment; all punishment is left to the community, so the teacher's relationship with the disrupter is not damaged.

In considering Summerhill, it is most important not to listen to the critical voice of the outside adult. Outside adults, on the whole, find it alien and incomprehensible, and point out how it fails to conform to their own ideas as if this were coherent and incontrovertible criticism. The way to understand Summerhill is to see it from the inside, as a child, without preconceptions.

Summerhill is a society of children, run by and for children. And this society rests on a platform created by the adults, who maintain the building and the grounds in which the children's society exists. There is a deliberate limit set to the range of topics decided by the school meeting, because it is felt that children should not have to cope with worries about finance, public

relations, staffing, gardening, maintenance and housework. The adults mostly mind their business, and the children mind theirs.

Summerhill recognises a split between the children's world and the adult world, but instead of this meaning that the adults feel they have to get control over the children's world to prevent them from carving each other up, they leave the children to get on with their own affairs. The school meeting can sort out personal problems just as well as it copes with discipline. There is no need for the adults to interfere.

The adults are nevertheless available. They give their lessons. They attend school meetings. Their rooms are always open. Zoe Readhead considers that there are two ways of patronising children: telling them what to do, and standing condescendingly out of their way. Summerhill staff have to avoid both these types of behaviour, and fit into the children's society on equal terms. The differences between young and old are recognised, but there is no chasm.

Part of the school's custom of holding parents at a distance is probably due to the way parents seem quite incapable of avoiding Zoe's Scylla and Charybdis of patronisation. When the school started, it took boarders as young as three. (At Dora and Bertrand Russell's school at Beacon Hill they took them at two.) Even leaving aside the question of Oedipal problems, it was felt that parents represented too strong an adult influence, and prevented their own children from developing as fully as they would do in a properly free environment. Hylda Sims says "It was a great relief to see the back of my parents, having paid the usual lip-service to their anxious advice," and this encapsulates the problem from a child's point of view. Homesickness, which causes so much misery to so many children sent away from home, may have many different causes, but confident children tend to be happier when they are not under their parents' eyes. And it is only away from their parents that children are able to develop true moral independence. Even so, Summerhill now takes no boarders younger than six, and has some day-pupils.

The essence of Summerhill is allowing children to direct their own lives, separately from the adult world - protected from inappropriate practical concerns, protected from parental advice and expectation, uninfluenced by adult authority. The children themselves set limits to their own freedom, in order to make their lives as secure and happy as possible, and the children themselves decide when they will go to lessons. Remember not to criticise from an adult point of view; see yourself as a child, enjoying Summerhill to the full, and of course, being who you are, making responsible use of it.

Don't you wish you had been there?



2 Dartington Hall School

The history of Dartington Hall School runs from 1926, when it was founded in an atmosphere of adventurous idealism, until 1987, when it was closed in bitter disillusionment. The children were not disillusioned with the school, and nor were the staff. It was the Trustees who were disillusioned with the school; the children and staff were disillusioned with the Trustees. (Strictly speaking the school was run by a Board of Governors, and the Dartington Hall estate was run by the Trustees. In practice the Trustees held ultimate authority over both.) The story which follows illustrates the way different groups may have very different perceptions of a school.

What teachers see as the most important aspects of a school may not matter much to the children. What the children care about may be of no significance to the Governors. The views of the Governors may bear no relation to the views of the local press or the wider public.

I taught at the school myself from 1959 to 1961 and then from 1963 until it closed in 1987 with only one short attempt at retirement in 1986. My first wife was a pupil there from 1947 to 1960, my second wife was a teacher there and all my four children attended as pupils from the age of three, so I have known the school from many different angles, at first or second hand. Michael Young, in his book *The Elmhursts of Dartington*, has seen it from yet another. What struck me most when I re-read his book was the way his attitude towards the school changed between the time he was a pupil and his later years as a Trustee of the Dartington Hall Trust and Governor of the school.

He describes his time as a pupil with vigorous honesty, and draws attention to the discrepancies between the expectations of idealistic adults and reality as he experienced it. Here he disagrees with Bertrand Russell:

According to Bertrand Russell "The man who has reverence will not think it his duty to 'mould' the young. He feels in all that lives, and most of all in children, something sacred, indefinable, unlimited, something individual and strangely precious, the growing principle of life, an embodied fragment of the dumb striving of the world." I did not ever feel like that. I was not dumbly striving at all. I was striving noisily for my supper, particularly when I had sold enough eggs in the market to afford fish as well as chips.

That's all, Folks

And here he disagrees with Curry, the first headmaster, quoting from his book, *The School*:

It is 'desirable for boys and girls to see each other wholly or partially undressed as, so to speak, part of the day's work.' This on the grounds that 'nudity, after the first few occasions, diminishes rather than increases sexual interest.' I, among others, did not find it so.

The Elmhursts of Dartington

Later, when he writes about the 1970s he quotes the then head, Royston Lambert, without apparently remembering that a head-teacher's idea of what goes on in his school is unlikely to be entirely accurate. Royston Lambert was particularly unaware of the feelings of those around him and did not seem to understand the actual practical effect of his own innovations, the value of which he sometimes underestimated. In his book, Michael Young can only take him at his own evaluation.

This makes me realise that I must be extremely cautious in what I say, because I too had a particular relationship with the school. Not only did I spend most of my teaching life at Dartington, but also I loved it deeply. It was the school that introduced me to the possibility of an honest relationship between teachers and children, the first school I knew where there was no need for the irrational authority that elsewhere I had found it so hard to assume, where I could be with children on equal terms, where the children respected me for myself and not for my position. It was the first school I knew where I could respond intuitively to the children's reasonableness, empathy and altruism instead of trying to enforce an unnecessary mass of rules.

Jenifer Smith, a teacher who later went on to teach at Countesthorpe College (see Chapter Seven), recorded her reactions to Dartington in her thesis, *An Exploration of Teaching in Action*. They were similar to mine.

I taught for two years at Aller Park School, the middle school section of Dartington Hall School.

At Dartington I learnt a different way of being with children; different from most schools I had known; different from many parents and children I knew.

At Dartington many phrases used to describe a way of teaching and being with children could be seen in practice rather than different behaviour which claimed that description. It seems easy to use the words, to claim all kinds of attitudes to children, but not actually enact whatever those attitudes imply. We can talk of respect for the child, of the potential of the individual, of the importance of the child's experience, of the child at the centre of her learning and in the same breath deny all that if we talk from our superior position as adults in relation to the inexperienced child.

At Dartington adults did not seem to have to maintain any kind of superior position towards children or amongst themselves.

Nor did they indulge in the kind of chumminess and self-dissonant behaviour which actually implies a condescension towards children.



Adults treated children with genuine courtesy. They treated them as other people.

Later she describes what she feels she learnt there:

At Dartington the removal of superficial legislation allowed me, and children, to put our minds to things that we felt to be important. I learnt something about the nature of freedom within the restrictions of a school; what I could let go and how I might behave and expect others to behave so that freedom was not abused or allowed to become chaos.

- I learnt from the freedom and from the attendant responsibility which was accorded to me in the classroom; and I learnt from being with children and adults at Dartington.
- I saw how it was to be with children in a peaceful, open way.
- I saw an easiness between adults and children.
- I saw adults treat children who had behaved terribly badly with a firmness and compassion and fairness that supported and nourished and did not condemn.
- I saw adults and children engrossed in conversation; sharing joyful activity, music-making, flying kites, canoeing, camping; I saw them engaged in serious pursuits together, badger-watching, taking pinhole photographs, keeping bees, each learning from the other.
- And I had a chance to do these things myself.
- I also saw adults able to step back and allow children to engage in their own pursuits without adult interference. Despite all kinds of sophistication, children seemed able to be children for longer.
- At Dartington children directly challenged me and my assumptions and I had to recognise their criticisms and answer properly.
- I found the children were genuinely interested in what I had to say even if they didn't always agree with me. I found children appreciating me despite our differences and I felt honoured by them.
- I found the children genuinely good company.

An Exploration of Teaching in Action

Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst bought the run-down Dartington Hall estate in Devon in 1925 with the intention of reinvigorating the local rural community, halting the migration to the towns, setting an example for the rest of the world to follow with experimental agriculture, forestry and rural industry, and creating a centre for the arts. And they wanted to start a school which would depart from established educational practice and lead to a betterment of society. Leonard Elmhirst used to tell the story of the amazed estate agent, faced with his unusual requirements. "It must have good soil, because we want to farm, and it must have woods and orchards, as we want variety. And we are starting a school, so it must be beautiful." However, it

was not to be primarily a school for the children of estate workers, but a boarding school with a few day-children attached; even when it opened its doors in 1926 there were six boarders and only three day-pupils, and these three day-pupils were the Elmhirsts' own children.

It was planned to be more of an extended family than a school, and the whole estate was to be available to provide the curriculum. Children who wanted to grow vegetables or fruit, or keep bees, were to work in the Garden Department, where they could also learn landscape gardening or botanical science. In the Workshop Department they could assist in repair and construction, in the Poultry Department they would learn about nutrition, statistics, accounts and commerce as well as caring for hens. (Michael Young himself worked in the Poultry Department, without, he says, learning anything about nutrition or statistics - another example of his adolescent disregard for adult expectations.)

There were to be no punishments, no prefects, no uniform, no segregation of the sexes, no compulsory religion or compulsory games, no competition. Dorothy and Leonard themselves both taught in the school, and the few adults whose particular job it was to look after the children were recruited from friends or by personal recommendation. There was to be no head-teacher, because Leonard wanted "the thing to grow quite naturally out of our own home life," as he said, but he and Dorothy were nevertheless plainly in charge. There were many expeditions, and frequent visits from distinguished people. Dorothy ran a "Question Club" where children could ask whatever they wanted to ask, and the questions which arose about sex were answered as straightforwardly and honestly as any others, even in the 1920s. To avoid differentiating teachers and pupils too sharply, they were referred to as Seniors and Juniors. Michael Young summed it up as follows:

Rules of a sort multiplied, some of them with the sanction of the General Meeting of all Juniors and Seniors. But the rules are not what people remember. To very few of the children - either in that first year or in the few that followed - did it seem like a school. As well as the projects to do with the rebuilding, which was going along at a great pace, and with the operation of the estate, there must have been some ordinary classes, without visits to prehistoric caves. But they are not remembered. In retrospect it does seem like the large extended family Leonard wanted it to be, made up of the people on an estate and in a school which were not yet fully differentiated from each other.

The Elmhirsts of Dartington

By 1929 there were 25 pupils, and the school was finding it necessary to help the older children to prepare for the School and Higher Certificates. Michael Young comments that things were becoming more orthodox, but:

That is, however, not how it seemed to me or several of the other children who arrived that September. For those who had been at orthodox schools the difference seemed immense, especially in the behaviour of the adults. When she heard she had a baby half-brother Pauline Church sat on Vic's lap for the best part of two days until she began to recover. Ernest Gruenberg was taking so much pleasure in learning pottery from Bernard and David Leach that he almost decided to take that up instead of psychology. Dougie Hart was finding the first adults in his life who were 'on his side'. As for me, the murderous feelings I had before were leaving me because I was happy. The adults may have been suffering from doubt and anxiety. To us it seemed that the little world Dorothy and Leonard had created was not far short of a children's paradise.

The Elmhursts of Dartington

Michael Young gives the official view of what was happening, and comments "That is, however, not how it seemed to me." The most important aspect of any school is not what the teachers think, or what the headmaster thinks, or what the governors think. It is what the children think.

By 1931 there were over 50 pupils and W. B. Curry was appointed to be head of the school. He was given generous financial support. Curry described the situation:

After the early years it was found expedient to separate the actual organisation of the estate and school in such a way as to admit of administrative autonomy for each, but to permit of co-operation where mutual interests could be served. As the school and the estate have both reached a stage where some guarantee of permanence and continuity is desirable, they are now organised as a trust and are enrolled with the Charity Commissioners as such. Under the trust deed the founders undertake to provide, at their own expense, all necessary buildings and equipment for the school, and furthermore to provide a permanent annual income which has been fixed at a level sufficient to ensure the preservation of high standards of staff and equipment. This makes the school unique, since it is probably the first time in England that a school, avowedly liberal and progressive in its outlook, has been endowed on a scale commensurate with that of the best traditional schools.

1934 Modern Schools Handbook

This financial support was gradually eroded throughout the school's history, partly by inflation, partly by necessary economies during the war, and in the final years, after the death of the Elmhursts, partly by what appeared to be deliberate policy on the part of the Trustees, who had come to see the school as an expensive embarrassment. Some of them at least felt that on the

one hand it was no longer contributing to educational experiment and on the other it was failing to cope with modern adolescents who needed discipline to avoid corruption from permissive attitudes to sex and drugs.

Curry remained head until 1957. He was a charismatic figure and it was during his headship that the school developed its mature character. Connections with the estate withered, from an educational standpoint because experts in practical work are not necessarily experts in teaching, and from a commercial standpoint because men trying to sell furniture resented being associated with a school famous principally for allowing nude bathing. The school eventually split into three sites, within a mile of each other - a small nursery school, the junior and middle schools for children up to thirteen, and a senior school. Self-government became stronger, and went through various forms before arriving at a fairly stable system with an elected council in the Junior and Middle Schools, which had limited powers but was able to make whatever recommendations it liked, and a two-tier system in the Senior School which theoretically had power over all matters except rules concerning safety and health; major decisions were taken by the Moot, an open meeting at which all the students and staff who attended to hear the discussion had equal votes, and an elected Agenda Committee, which settled minor issues and decided what other matters should be brought before the Moot.

Dartington, from Curry's arrival onwards, set value on academic achievement, and took pride in the number of students who went on to university. This was in marked contrast to most of the schools in this book. Curry was not even particularly interested in styles of teaching, as long as they were effective: he felt that if the social atmosphere was right, then the right atmosphere would automatically ensue in the classroom.

Rules were kept as few as possible, and there was no system of punishment. If you misbehaved in a lesson, you might be excluded, but nothing more. If you broke something, you might have to mend it or pay for its repair. The relationship between adults and children was one of social equality; the completeness of this social equality is shown by the fact that I was only one among several staff over the history of the school who fell in love with students and later married them.

Boarders had their own rooms, and boys and girls lived on the same corridors and shared the same bathrooms and showers. Outsiders who expected this to result in continual sexual activity were wrong. Maurice Punch's book, *Progressive Retreat*, is based on research with two groups of ex-pupils, one from the thirties and one from the fifties. The following comments illustrate two attitudes that I believe to have been common among the students. (Punch used no names, and the awkward descriptions "Thirties woman", etc., are the consequence of this.)

The boys all used to send for French letters by mail order. I mean most of them were left down in the courtyard, full of water. This was a great joke. But it was really quite a serious business at Dartington, but my husband would never understand this; but it's difficult for you all to understand, those who haven't been there. There was this enormous feeling of respect about that kind of thing; but in a way we were sort of romantics. I can remember at 15 talking endlessly about this, that you didn't go to bed with somebody unless you were really in love, and to be really in love with someone you had to be able to talk to each other and understand each other about everything.

Thirties woman in Progressive Retreat

Interviewer: Was it difficult growing up with boys to feel very romantic about them?

Fifties woman: You couldn't really, not really. When you'd seen them in the swimming pool and being weighed and measured and washed their socks and things like that which you did do occasionally you couldn't get frightfully romantic about them.

Progressive Retreat

During the whole time I was on the staff of the school I believe there were five pregnancies among the students, but that is many fewer than would have occurred among similar groups of children living at home. There was generally an openness about relationships between girls and boys that those who disapproved found threatening. Those without prejudice found it reassuring.

In 1957 Curry's place was taken by Hu and Lois Child. When Curry had arrived at the school in 1931 the children had been outraged by the ban he imposed on motor-vehicles and fire-arms; in 1957 they were outraged at having nude bathing restricted to before breakfast. Under the Childs the academic side of the school received more emphasis - the middle school timetable, for instance, extended into the afternoon, French was started at the age of ten instead of thirteen (which, as it turned out, made no difference to exam results at sixteen), a quiet hour was introduced in the evenings when people were to remain in their own rooms to read or work or sleep. In spite of this respect for academic learning, many children had a great deal of time to themselves; when I first arrived there was one boy who had only two lessons a week.

The school grew, and new buildings went up. There was a feeling of stability and confidence.

Stability and confidence, however, were not what the Trustees wanted. In 1969, when the school had 293 children and 150 future applications on file, they appointed Royston Lambert, who proclaimed himself the first non-head of an anti-school and in four years introduced a number of stimulating

experiments that caused much excitement and were of great value to many children, but tore apart the fabric of the school and one after another had to be abandoned.

He moved the sixth form to a separate boarding centre of their own, where they were allowed cars, had their own bar and were comparatively unsupervised. The rest of the senior school seemed, as it were, decapitated, and as the sixth-formers drove off for the week-ends in their cars the school lost its social cohesion and suddenly everyone went home at half term instead of staying at school because school was more exciting.

He set up links with Northcliffe School, a secondary school in a mining community in Yorkshire, and much of value resulted, but the scheme collapsed for lack of funds.

He built a new nursery school which was to be shared with the LEA. The private side declined because parents could send their children there for nothing. The school became a state nursery school, valuable but not particularly distinctive. The head was overwhelmed with administrative work and the junior school lost a steady source of new pupils.

He arranged for a group of school-leavers to go to Sicily for six months every year, and to live as peasants among the peasants. The experience was overwhelming, but the experiment only lasted a few years.

Under the joint headship of the Childs, the students had had many bands of their own, a magazine of their own, plays of their own, an internal broadcasting system of their own. Under Royston Lambert there was so much organised by adults, so many students away at week-ends, so many project weeks that interrupted everything else, that student initiative withered away. Many changes were made without reference to Moot, and the system of self-government also suffered. There was a misunderstanding with the Trustees over finance, and vastly more money was spent on new buildings than they had intended. As a result the school fees rocketed. After four years out of the five of his original contract Royston Lambert announced that he had made the changes that he wanted to make and would now be able to fulfil his duties in only one week a month. This resulted in his departure, and it was left to John Wightwick, English teacher and deputy head, to take over the headship and try to restore something of what had been lost.

There followed a time of national recession, further increases in fees and consequent reductions in numbers. The punk ethos affected some children even at Dartington. Morale naturally declined, and yet this was the time when my own children were going through the senior school, and neither they nor I would have wished them to be anywhere else. I was by then head of the junior and middle schools, and apart from worrying about falling numbers I was very happy. The catastrophe that followed I shall leave for the end of the chapter, because you need to know more of the wonder of the school at its best to

understand the tragedy of its end. For this it is necessary to listen to those who were actually students at the school.

The comments that I shall quote from students come from *Progressive Retreat* and *That's all, Folks*, the anthology of reminiscence and reflection produced in 1986, after the closure of the school had been announced.

Maurice Punch based his book on his interviews, but he knew what he thought of the school before he began his research, which was that it was on the one hand a cosseted retreat for the children of wealthy liberals who wished their offspring to be saved from contact with the corrupting world outside, and on the other a last refuge for maladjusted adolescents whose wealthy parents had long tried conventional education but had at last abandoned all hope of getting anything out of it. The children were, he believed, allowed freedoms which made it difficult for them to adjust to the restraints of ordinary life after they left school. He did not seem to see the other side to his preconceptions. He did not seem to recognise that the ideal school would necessarily set itself apart from convention, nor that the rescue of the maladjusted, even though they have wealthy parents, is still a worthwhile task, nor that perhaps ordinary life after school is so lacking in human values that it is an immoral exercise to prepare children to succeed in it. Nor did he understand that it is important to demonstrate a proper relationship between teachers and children, even if the state will not pay you to do so.

He found evidence to support all his preconceptions. His approach can be illustrated by his section about Curry. He says that, of the replies to his interviews, "some bordered on the hagiographic, many were adulatory, others were sceptical and a few were condemnatory." He then quotes fifteen extracts, of which eight are negative, five are neutral and only two are positive.

It is, nevertheless, possible to find some of the school's wonder even in Maurice Punch's book.

One day 'Reg' [a member of staff] said "This is absolutely bloody. Let's all change places." So for a whole twenty-four hours we all changed places. The staff became the children and the children became the staff. For a child, looking back now, it was marvellous. It was a life-saver. I mean at ten o'clock at night 'Frank' [a member of staff] would suddenly say, "Let's all go to Goodrington and have a beach picnic." And we would all jump in those elderly cars and an old bus, and we would build an enormous bonfire on Goodrington beach and bathe by moonlight.

Recorded interview

My first impression was when I met the school on the train at Paddington, about the extraordinary open friendliness of the children. The way they came to meet me, so that this reserve and suspicion and hidden self-centredness that was characteristic of the prep. school was absent, and I felt the

extraordinary openness and friendliness of the children and their self-confidence. There was the incredible difference in atmosphere on the school train, one of people being shipped off to the concentration camps and one of the children going off on a holiday. And, when I got there, there was an incredibly different atmosphere, everything was strange, rather beautiful, and they were fairly free with the money, the food was extraordinarily good, they couldn't possibly have afforded to keep it up. It was very exciting. It was like going to Paradise after the place I had been at.

Thirties man, MS

I'm not a very useful barometer pro- or anti-Curry because I owe him so much in an emotional and practical way. Funnily enough, he wasn't a great teacher, but he had great personal magnetism. As a tortured child, he gave me the impression of being deeply sincerely interested in me and my problems. I felt he was totally concerned with my problems.

Fifties woman, pilot interview

It was an ideal place for someone who wanted to work and knew what they wanted to do, and at that time the teaching was absolutely first-class. When I was at the top of the senior school we lived in the Old Postern. You had no set bed time and you could work on your own. It was a bit like a university. It was much livelier than my university in fact; there was no question at Dartington of going to a class and having someone read out of a textbook - I had to go to a university to discover that that sort of teaching existed.

Thirties woman, MS

When [David Lack] got on to ornithology or animal behaviour, he just lit up with excitement. I used to be engaged on making cages, you know he did all the early work on territorialism in robins, and we used to go out with him, and catch them and ring them. And because I was involved in this I got a kind of feel, I don't think I understood his research, but a feel for the enthusiasm that is implicit in good scientific research. So when I was fifteen, without knowing it, I appreciated what a good, scientific research worker, who is committed to his work, really does and feels about.

Thirties man, MS

In my last three years I produced cabarets, wrote the songs, did the choreography, general entertainment. I was always a good organiser so I would put up a notice "Planning half-term revue - helpers please sign" and I would find as many as forty to fifty names. Curry even asked me not to do my cabarets during the summer term when exams were on but other times I was kept very busy with it and found it very gratifying.

Fifties woman, MS

There are also passages which Punch quoted to demonstrate failings that seem to me to demonstrate virtues. The following passage, for instance, is supposed to show only the Dartington children's arrogance and a deliberate wish to shock:

Totnes was very Conservative with a capital 'C' and when we used to have our general elections in school we used to go down to the party political meetings in the village hall and I remember being turned on once by the brigadier somebody or other. I was turned on but we used to take it all quite seriously. We weren't very popular but 'Graham' used to be all day in the library reading Hansard for good questions to ask, and we used to get 'Oh! They be from Dartin'on 'all, you don't want to listen to they.' We used to be chucked out as often as not. Not chucked out but told to sit down, and come back when we were grown up.

Fifties woman MS

Punch allows the children no credit for taking politics seriously; even 'Graham' is apparently thought to be reading Hansard only in order to show off. The brigadier somebody or other and the people who tell the children to come back when they are grown up are not to be criticised for their attitude, and the scorn of the people with the local accents, Punch seems to feel, is justified by the fact that the Dartington girl later recorded the way they spoke. Punch is always on the side of the outsider: if you put yourself in the place of the students, you immediately sense a real political excitement in the confrontations, and a serious concern about political issues.

The following quotation was chosen to illustrate the school's puritanism; puritanism, by implication, was a bad thing:

There were very strong taboos about wearing make-up, an exception at parties possibly, and the standards about make-up were more specific than that. Lipstick was slightly ridiculous but OK, powder was not because that was deception, you couldn't necessarily tell if someone was wearing powder. Stockings were not to be worn except at parties, to the extent that I said I wouldn't wear stockings every day at university but that went pretty soon. But these things were pretty deeply ingrained. There was this sort of puritanism, I remember several girls in the year ahead of us just happened to become models immediately after they left and there was a very strong feeling about this being a profoundly immoral thing to do and I remember somebody's moan that it was just the same as being a prostitute and selling your body.

Fifties woman, MS

The last sentence is of course an exaggeration, but an interesting one. The rest seems not so much puritanism as an expression of a natural concern that people should be allowed to be themselves. Students at free schools usually reject conventional standards of make-up and dress which hide a person's true identity. Though at Dartington it may have made things hard for girls who longed to make themselves pretty, it also gave them an attractive individuality that set them far above the painted dolls who were fashionable at the time. Such things were discussed and argued out, and there was a deep concern for honesty.

All these quotations from Maurice Punch's books are only extracts from a selection of extracts. There follow two complete contributions to *That's all, Folks*, a book whose title appeared mysteriously on the roof of the school when its closure was finally announced. I invited ex-pupils to send me four hundred words giving their reasons for going to Dartington, their experiences while there, and its effect on their life since leaving school. As you will see, people paid little attention to the precise terms of the request. Vanessa Pawsey, who wrote the first piece, was at the school in the early sixties.

Dartington: rich moist Autumn, great trees in folded private valleys, the strange red soil and Foxhole [the senior school building] crisply white. I took my father down for an interview and as he met with the Childs' approval I then spent two A-level years there.

They were highly significant years. For the first time in my life I was in a world where the importance of aesthetics was taken for granted (I revelled in the sunshine on polished parquet), where painting and drawing and making poems and music were legitimate activities rather than childish pastimes.

At my previous schools I had always been an odd one out; too clever, too small, too young and having to travel too far each day. I sharply recall sitting alone in a school common room in full view and one of the 'real' girls coming in and saying "Oh, there's no one here." At Dartington I found myself taken on trust as a person, and then liked for what I was, instead of for a few bits of me left after censorship. I wish I could afford such an education for my children.

At Dartington, then, I think there was an implicit assumption that the world was full of people who could be distinguished from each other by differences in their skills and graces, by their temperaments, capacity for empathy, hair colour, height and sex, etc., sex being merely one among many ways of sorting people and of limited use in predicting their natures. This was entirely in line with my upbringing and removed some of the burden of being handy with pliers and partial to argument. At University this became a problem again but at least I knew then because of Dartington that I was a 'real' person and scattered around the world there were more like me. I had also learnt that good friendships can happen with people of any age.

I learnt many important things about myself: that being surrounded by fields, trees and hills compensates me for many ills and enhances any pleasure, that making music with other people, being part of the stream of plaiting harmonies, is a fierce delight. I learnt that not everyone shares my compulsion to fit words to all experience, or is in sympathy with it.

I coincided with a building phase; bad boys spent the evening driving the dumper truck and leaving it in silly places. I saw the completion of the amazing Architected Dining Room Extension whose rain-stained ceiling we painted Egyptian scenes on for the Christmas party. The new art block was lovely, so many corners providing a feeling of mental room to get on with your own inventing. We also had the benefit of the spacious new biology lab with a long bench under a west window full of the most beautiful view; real balm for eyes stinging with formalin, as we hunched over our pickled dogfish cranial nerves on Friday mornings until our rock salmon and chips lunch.

The two houses, separated by the courtyard, felt like two distinct social groups, and for us older ones there was the choice between town - a room looking on to the courtyard, convenient for non-stop conversation with passers by and illicit visiting at night - or country; I was definitely an outward-looking window. This made getting out even easier so that, when the fancy took me, I could set off in the half light of an early summer morning and walk down to the river in sole possession of the world. I only met people on the way back to breakfast. Monkshood and perfumed pink balsam grow beside the river, and cows trampled the grass under the big oaks. There was an aged pollard willow mined with huge tunnels which I took for granted were Goats Moth larvae holes. I wonder if they were?

I walked often beside that river with different friends in atmospheres of varying intensity and always the walks were special. North Woods up behind the Postern was another good place - we rarely met anyone there. Instead, stinkhorns slipping out of slimy eggs, burning autumnal bushes blazing among the dark conifers, flints only there by the grace of Early Man, and endless intense self-analytical conversations. I can remember what I saw but not what we said.

Nobody that I can recall really disliking. Some that I did not ever know. Many I liked and a few I lusted after. We were a 50s lot - I was still a virgin when I left, in spite of the much publicised nude bathing, and so were my friends.

I was very fortunate in the teachers I coincided with. To miss one of June's English lessons was a terrible disappointment. She greeted my first poem with "I wondered when you'd start!" She became my tutor and gave me a level of support and challenge in my despairs about Life that one only expects from a Fairy Godmother. Magically too I always felt that our relationship readjusted to an equal footing again.

Of the four teachers who covered Botany and Zoology, Richard Pau was a godsend. Our zoology group was feeling very lost and leaderless when this visitor was brought in who to our surprise knew all the finer points of crayfish

innards just when we needed it most. Over the next fortnight we all went independently and arranged tutorials with him until he agreed to stay on and see us through the exams. I remember lolling with Richard on a grassy bank as the sun set before supper having a tutorial on the subject of pelagic larvae, and afterwards finding myself the subject of scurrilous rumours. Combining the disciplines of English and Biology I discovered that essays for them required non-overlapping styles of writing, and quite different standards of acceptable evidence. Artistic drawings of dissected dogfish or poems on the aphid's life cycle just didn't do.

Casting my mind back across the years some incidents come easily to mind; Baz caught a salmon-trout on Dartmoor using his gabardine mac. Somehow this all happened during an English class. When I saw it huge and dead, its head and tail were sticking out either side of his washbasin.

During Useful Work one morning (I had chosen the farm where we might be hoeing bushy green spuds, marking piglets' ears, pulling rusty nails from old timber or w.h.y.) a small boy with long grey shorts and short black fingernails bet me I couldn't guess what he had in his pocket. I couldn't; it was a dead mole. Bob Penn [an estate forester] had given it to him. He was going to skin it in break.

Penny had an absent-minded habit of drawing pictures with salt and the odd baked bean on the table after supper, pitting her tall stories against Pete Adler's to see who disbelieved soonest.

I wept when the train dragged me away each end of term, though living there made me feel that anything was possible; whatever the world held I could achieve and understand it, and questioning the given could apply to any field of human assumption.

Many years later I found myself teaching in a huge state comprehensive school, and appalled by its uncaring atmosphere. I could not bring myself to enforce some of its more inhumane rules, but connived with the children to break them unobtrusively. I realised then that there was a vast gulf between the school's stated aims and the covert lessons the children learnt about how little that society valued them. I did not then understand the mechanisms that caused this split, though it was obvious that many evils arose from its great size which made anonymity so easy; so many children were known for the most part as "Hey, you!" High staff turnover and poor communications systems meant that many children left school pretty much as they entered it; their strengths, weaknesses, aims and efforts unacknowledged. Small wonder the children had little affection for their school or teachers, and discipline had to be based on fear alone.

Now I can see how at Dartington where we shared in the making of school rules and trying to enforce them, where we could press successfully for a change of teacher when one proved unable to teach us what we wanted to learn, and where we were depended on for our regular contribution to the domestic running of the school through 'useful work', we were learning how

communities tick, and how to exercise constructive power within them; how to handle the blunt serviceable instrument Democracy.

By contrast, the underlying unstated aim of that comprehensive being to achieve a Smooth-Running School with a Good Reputation, the resultant structure was of two opposing armies, teaching the skills of disruption. The children of that comprehensive quickly picked up the feeling that their presence was a threat to the achievement of that aim, to the equipment, the decor and to the staff's peace of mind.

John R. T. Davies was at the school from 1938 to 1942, and was one of the 200 ex-pupils I wrote to when I first started collecting contributions. This was his reply:

Yes, I DID get your letter - but kept putting it aside because, the more I thought about it, the more ridiculous, absurd and (probably) unbelievable seemed my thoughts about Dartington.

Thus, although retrospectively my few short years at Foxhole remain in mind as the most valued of my life, I would find it difficult to explain how they made me a happy, if overly self-critical, human being with a set of values of whose goodness I am necessarily convinced, which are yet inappropriate to much of the world around me.

Inappropriate inasmuch as I would far rather give than receive. I believe that I could blame on Dartington my lack of monetary ambition just as I must thank Dartington for providing that which made possible two successful careers - in music and the recovery and restoration of sound.

I could not begin to define that "that" - although a further by-product has been a cherished ability to enjoy the "good" without having to balance against the "bad" - and it has seemed to me that this has been an observable part of the spirit of Dartington.

To be grateful hardly compares with to rejoice; and it is perhaps the state of rejoicing and its condition of non-analysis which prevents me from making a useful contribution to the Dartington book ... but perhaps it might benefit from the inclusion of this "anti"-contribution.

I know that, were I to sit down and write and write again, I could not get it right!

The school closed in 1987. The Trustees had had their confidence in the school shaken by a "colloquy" they had held as early as 1965, entitled *Who are the Progressives now?*. The heads of the old progressive schools faced the heads of the new comprehensives, and there was a complete lack of mutual understanding, made worse by the fact that they used a shared vocabulary that meant different things to different people. The old heads were cautious in their claims and generous in their attention, whereas the new heads were assertive and scornful. They accused the old heads of being "an insignificant

backwater: protected, precious, unreal; no longer the vanguard to achievement, but rather a curiosity, something apart," as Maurice Ash recorded in the published record of the colloquy. Nobody asked the children what they thought.

Maurice Punch's book confirmed the impression. There was pressure on the school to do something new, because the Trust completely failed to understand that what the school did was not supposed to be new, it was supposed to be right. Royston Lambert introduced the novelty they were seeking, but at a high cost. John Wightwick was unable to re-establish the old unity of purpose, and the school became one where the children were allowed a great deal of freedom, but not a great deal of responsibility. Officially at least, they no longer set the limits to their own freedom. Though there were still only a few rules, it was now the staff who made them. At the same time, there was still no system of punishment, so what governed the children's behaviour was either a contented willingness to conform, individual standards, or the rough guidance of the subculture. Even so the school remained, for most of its pupils, a wonderful place to be.

However, the Trustees heard rumours about drugs and sex, and instead of recognising that these were universal problems, they were embarrassed that their school was not perfect, and in order to sort things out they appointed an energetic man of about forty who had just spent seven years in America.

However the new arrival was a man who showed no understanding of the ethos of the school whatever. He attempted to assert his personal authority, and when that was opposed he wrote a letter to parents alleging substance-abuse, under-age sex, organised burglary and witchcraft. He invited the drug squad into his own school to search the students' rooms, where they found nothing to justify further action. In short he antagonised staff and students to the point where, at the end of his first term, the staff passed a vote of no confidence in his ability to run the school and asked the Trustees to dismiss him. The Trust refused. His letter to parents had already reached the press, the Trust had refused to comment on it and the school was on the front page of the tabloids for the whole of the silly season. The *Sun* then discovered that he and his wife had posed for pornographic photographs just before they left for America, and it printed the top half of a few of the photographs. He resigned, but the school was now tarnished with the image of a porn-model headmaster to add to its notoriety.

Parents of children who were currently in the school still believed in it, and offered financial backing to support it through the inevitable period of collapsed recruitment, but this was not accepted, and four years later, in spite of vigorous student resistance, the Trustees closed it down.

What matters about a school is not what teachers think, or parents think, or Trustees think, it is what children think. But it is Trustees who hold the power.

Emma Fein was a student at the school at the time, and this is her contribution to *That's all, Folks*.

Those eyes - why didn't we believe what we saw -
 eyes of destruction
 eyes of malice
 eyes craving power, uncaring, unseeing -
 searching and grabbing.
 They were true to the last.

Believing in the good in humanity we stood as if naked.
 Somewhere there is something good in everyone, people make mistakes but if
 given a chance they will learn, they will grow and change.
 Too innocent, too giving to beware of what was really there.
 Those eyes were too hard, too unfeeling to listen, to accommodate anything
 but that which their own gaze was after.
 The mouth spoke.
 Those that listened without truly seeing were taken in,
 Clever words that squirmed and twisted.

The young have a clear sight - a way of seeing that some, many seem to lose
 with age.
 We were open.
 We were abused and were willing to forgive,
 many forgave without an apology.
 Promises were broken again and again.
 We saw the reality of the man behind those eyes, but we had no ultimate
 power -
 Those that did listened without seeing.

I never realised how fragile the whole thing was. A community surviving on
 humane values was crushed by a liar - someone who craved power and
 projected his own hang-ups onto others.
 Only someone who had dealings with pornography would see the world
 around him as a den of sex and vice -
 If you live in a large family you learn to understand the true nature of the love
 that exists there.

Much was learned, much has been lost.
 One thing remains clear - look close and believe what you see in the eyes.

3 Tamariki School

In 1966 two women in Christchurch, New Zealand, inspired by the examples of Summerhill and Mataranga, an alternative school in Wellington, called a public meeting to discuss the issues that concerned them. The first meeting was attended by about thirty people, of whom a third were parents unhappy with ordinary schools, a third were unsatisfied teachers and a third were from a psychological society which wanted schools to give greater consideration to mental health.

It was decided to form a school, and every week the group met to discuss philosophy and to find ways of raising money. How was each child's different pattern of growth to be acknowledged and supported? What should happen in the school to enable each child to grow up best to be itself?

As their first teacher they employed June Higginbottom, who had taught at Summerhill and Kilquhanity House, a school in Scotland based on Summerhill ideas, and at Tuarangi, a school in Gisborne, New Zealand, also based on the Summerhill model. The school opened with ten children in September 1967 in a hall leased from a brass band; that meant that it had to be cleared up by three o'clock every afternoon. The age range was from five to eleven, though most were eight or younger.

In January 1968, at the beginning of the next New Zealand school year, the school grew to about twenty, and moved into an old boarding-house with a big garden, unfortunately surrounded by smelly factories - a tannery, two rubber factories, a battery factory, a glue factory and two fish-processing plants. The school stayed there for twenty-five years, and in spite of the smells the place was treasured. This is how Emma Edwards, an ex-pupil, described life there:

I don't know if you've seen the old school at all, because I never went to the new building, but the old school was amazingly set out. You know, we had old car cases, and old car bodies and a bicycle trail that went through heaps of bush, and big old trees and big old swings - really big old trees, big old willow trees and stuff, and once you got to a certain age - I mean when you were really young there was just a multitude of things to do and people to be with, and you could think up these incredible games together. We would have things like make-up hopscotch and things like that, but there were far more creative things that you were doing. I remember making huts underground, and playing kind of dress-up games, and just role-playing heaps of stuff and having lots of fun, and then once you get older and you do morning class things, you've still got the whole afternoon to make these things, and I remember just making so many things, doing things that I'd be

really pleased with, and doing plays and it was just so much brain-storming going on and the kids were all really into it, together.

Lessons were voluntary, as they were at Summerhill, but there was not even a regular timetable of lessons, except for at the start of the day for the oldest children. Groups or individuals worked with teachers only when they found it appropriate. However, for June Higginbottom this was not the essential issue; what concerned her most was passing on disciplinary control to the children. She refused to take control herself, and when the children asked her to sort out the conflicts that arose she said they must find ways to do that for themselves.

The first rule they made was that if anyone told you to stop doing something that was annoying them, you had to stop. This proved unsatisfactory, because sometimes people would shout out "Stop!", for instance when they were being tickled, when they didn't really want the person to stop at all. To make it clear that you were serious, it was decided, what you must say is "I request you to stop," or "I request you not to do such-and-such". This form has persisted, and is still used, by teachers as well as children.

The next question was what to do when someone didn't obey a formal request. The answer the children devised was the meeting system. This is how it was described to me by Emma Edwards and her mother, Pat, who has been principal of the school since 1978.

Emma: There was this one boy who was a few years older than me that had really the dirtiest mouth of any kid I've ever actually ever met, really really abusive, things like whore and things like that, which were very distressing for an eight-year-old. And I would want to call a meeting on him, so I would go off and get someone as a chairperson. I go off and I get another kid who was a chairperson, who would go and find an adult, and I think I say to the adult what happened and that I want a meeting so - (to Pat) Does the chairperson go and call for the person or does the teacher?

Pat: Yes, the chairperson always goes and gets the person.

Emma: OK.

Pat: Quite often they will get the adult too.

Emma: OK. Yeah. And you sit down and the chairperson says - (to Pat) Is it "Meeting come to order"?

Pat: Yes.

Emma: And they ask the plaintiff to state the case while making the defendant keep their mouth shut, and then they have the floor, the defendant, and then the teacher tries to get it completely straight, and then find some sort of suitable solution, like that the person that abused me would have to stay away from me for the next day, or something, or the next couple of days they weren't allowed to be near me -



Pat: Usually they are asked not to do it again the first time.

Emma: Oh, is it? OK.

Pat: And then if they persist in doing it -

Emma: Asked to stay away. Yeah.

Me: So who is it who asks? The chairperson of the meeting, or the teacher?

Pat: Well, it would depend on who the teacher was, in my opinion. But some teachers will intervene and some will tend not to.

Emma: I thought it was the teachers that did the -

Pat: No. You thought that the teachers were the ones who -

Emma: Who decided on what should happen.

Pat: And my feeling was that with some chairpeople you just don't need to say anything, they'll just do everything, and with other chairpersons you've got to help them quite bit. And that some teachers are much more prone to wanting to solve everything, and leaping in and saying "Do this, do that, do the next thing", and other teachers will say hardly anything.

Meetings may also be called for breaches of any other rules. For instance two that the children later devised were that a joke is only a joke if both parties think it is funny, and a game is only a game if both parties wish to play.

For the first fifteen years the school consisted of roughly one third children of parents who chose the school because of its educational philosophy, one third children who had been made miserable at other schools (and their siblings), and one third last-ditch rescue cases. However, by the end of the 1980s there was a large number of parents who were committed to the ideals of the school, and it was possible to take in mainly five-year-olds, rather than older children who had already developed problems as a result of their treatment elsewhere.

There were two and a half teachers for thirty-five children, aged from five to thirteen. The school charged low fees and paid survival wages. Then in 1990 the school became integrated, that is to say supported by the state. They were given a suspensory loan of \$600,000 (New Zealand dollars, at about \$2.35 to the pound) to build a new school, the teachers got proper salaries and the school got \$50,000 a year on top of that. (The suspensory loan has to be repaid if the school closes within the next twenty-three years). The parents still pay \$1,250 a year to provide two extra teachers. There are now sixty children in the school, and there is a waiting list. A similar school called Springhill has been started in another part of Christchurch with ten children; like Tamariki when it started, it is in rented premises that have to be cleared up every afternoon, and it has no state support.

In order to gain state recognition, Tamariki produced a two-page definition of its special character, and a series of single-sheet policy statements covering

particular areas. At the beginning of the definition of its special character, we learn that:

The School works to:

- (a) Equip each child according to its nature and talents to lead a personally satisfying life, and to be an effective and contributing member of a democratic society.
- (b) Be a supportive community which nurtures its members and respects their individuality.

What is remarkable about these two aims is not what they say, but what they do not say: they make no mention of any kind of academic curriculum. The document adds to the surprise of this omission the promise of more surprises to come:

The means to achieving these aims are different in emphasis from mainstream New Zealand schooling and are what gives the School its Special Character.

The policy statements are all set out in a particular format, with sections headed Rationale, Purpose, Guidelines and Conclusion. To give an idea of the general system I shall quote the whole of the most unusual of the policies - the policy on mess.

TAMARIKI SCHOOL

Policy on mess

Rationale: For children in this age-group a degree of mess promotes creativity and learning.

Purpose: To provide an environment which encourages children to perceive the possibilities for combining and recombining its elements in fresh and creative ways.

To provide an environment in which activities may be carried through to their natural conclusion and not arbitrarily interrupted by adult demands for cleaning-up.

To provide an environment in which children may directly experience their own personal points of frustration at which mess becomes counter-productive.

Guidelines: 1. The environment should be as homelike and non-institutional as possible.

2. Procedures: Limits for mess should be established in Whole School Meeting.

3. Children (and adults) should be helped to understand the distinction between health-threatening dirtiness and mess.
4. Children should be encouraged to clear up when their activity is genuinely finished and adult help provided where required.
5. If an area is left so untidy that it is uncleanable, it should be declared a no-go area in a Whole School Meeting until it has been tidied by volunteers.
6. Safety and health are always important and should not be compromised, e.g. sharp bits of metal or glass, nails in wood or food scraps inside should all be cleaned up immediately.
7. As wide as possible a range of materials suitable for creative play should be provided and children encouraged to explore their potential.

Conclusion: Since at the school it has been repeatedly observed that children's imaginations work best in a degree of disorder, adults should be very wary of demanding order in areas in which they are not personally and immediately affected.

The following extracts from other policy statements are chosen to illustrate the special character of the school.

From Policy on the role of the teacher

Guidelines: N.B. All teaching activities must be non-invasive and non-coercive.

Pressure to attend class may only be put on a child after discussion with the Principal and the child, when there is clear evidence, acknowledged by the child, that it is avoiding the class because of fear of failure. In this situation the Teacher has a clear responsibility to avoid putting the child in a position in which it will fail.

1. A Teacher works with a child and not with the subject matter.
2. The Teacher needs to learn about each individual child's way of communicating and of learning and to be sensitive to these.
3. The Teacher needs to accept individual development rates and not try to hurry a child in order to meet arbitrarily imposed achievement goals.
- ...
6. The Teacher may teach in whatever style seems appropriate to that child.
7. The Teacher should recognise the child's ownership of its learning and its products.

Conclusion: Teaching at Tamariki School requires the ability to listen and to be patient, i.e. to be there for the child rather than to do things for and to the child.

From Policy on Pastoral Care

Purposes:

...

3. To provide the means for children and adults at school to interact with emotional honesty.
4. To provide an environment and ambience which encourage the expression and acceptance of feelings.
5. To acknowledge the interdependence of feeling and cognitive learning.

Guidelines: 1. Children's emotional needs should have priority over all other demands.

From Policy on Assessment and Evaluation

Conclusion: Assessment is a tool and not a goal.

From Policy on Reading

- Purposes:**
1. To enable children to learn to read in as natural and unforced a way as possible.
 2. To develop a pleasure in literature and an awareness of the enrichment that literacy brings.
 3. To prevent children being turned off from reading.

Guidelines:

...

6. In this school a very clear pattern of learning to read has emerged. About 35% of children learn with minimal or no instruction, usually by 7, about 50% with a fair degree of teacher support and input, usually by 9 to 9½, and the remaining 15% require intensive teacher help. Teachers should be alert from 8 years on to identify children in this last group. While no firm guidelines can be given and each child's difficulties must be carefully evaluated, remedial assistance should be given as soon as the child will permit. The school has a consistent history of keeping children open to reading and this should be a teacher's goal at all times.

Conclusion: Reading is third only to speaking and listening as a major communication mode.

From Policy on Parents in the School

Purposes: 1. To promote children's feelings of security.

2. To help children perceive that their learning at school is an extension of their earlier learning at home.
3. To enrich the school environment by the presence and input of the parents and greater family.
4. To enhance parent and staff understanding of each child.
5. To enhance parent understanding of the functioning of the school.

Guidelines: 1. Parents are welcome in the school at all times and are not required to fill any particular role.

...

6. Parents should respect children's need for privacy in the classroom and in other activities.

Conclusion: Parents' responsibility to and for their children does not stop when the children enter the School, but is shared with it. They have a right to participate in the school community, sharing its customs and obligations.

I spent a week in the school in November 1996. The main building consists of four classrooms built round a central meeting-room, with an office, cloakrooms and a small kitchen fitted in between them. The meeting room has a staircase up to a landing where there are books and cushions for quiet reading. The classrooms are well-equipped and comfortable. There are, for example, two pianos in the meeting room, plenty of books everywhere, computers in every classroom and a video camera available for anyone to use. Each room is the responsibility of one teacher, and two of the rooms are reserved primarily for the oldest children, although there is no rigid division by age. In these two rooms the day often starts with something like a conventional lesson.

This building is set in grounds of about a hectare. As yet there are no big trees, but there is a row of pollarded willows that are big enough to climb, a big football pitch, a patch of uncultivated ground where you can build camps, tarmac for roller-blades and skateboards, swings, rubber tyres, poles to balance on and plenty of sand and mud.

As well as the new main building the grounds also contain an old railway-carriage which is divided into two sections which can be booked for whatever groups may wish to use them for - fantasy games, pillow-fights, private conversation or whatever - and a long barn where there is a space used for dance and drama with a big mirror right across one end, and a woodwork room and various stores. Around most of these buildings are verandas with battered arm-chairs and sofas; here I spent quite a lot of my time, listening, talking and watching, attending to children who asked me to listen to their reading - and, on the first day or two, sleeping off the effects of jet-lag.

An hour or so after I arrived on my first morning there was a whole school meeting. It was chaired by one of the girls, but it had been called by Pat Edwards, principally to announce the arrangements made necessary by the absence of one of the teachers. I took advantage of the occasion to ask permission to take photographs, record interviews and play the piano. This was granted without question, as if I had made an announcement rather than a request, but I was assured afterwards that the chair had looked round for objections before she assented. The meeting ended after a few children had made announcements about lost property.

After the meeting a six-year-old boy called Israel Storey offered to show me round, and after we had seen everything we played for a while with a home-made ladder and a horizontal pole which had a real saddle fixed to it. The children who offer to guide visitors round free schools are often those who have difficulties in relating to their contemporaries, and though this was perhaps also the case with Israel, he was neither excluded, nor, I think, unhappy. On another day he and I built a house out of cushions in one of the railway carriage compartments, and I left him with a group of other children who wanted to join in. What he appeared to want to learn most was how to get on better with other people, and he was able to spend his whole time at school doing exactly that.

Although there was no compulsory timetable, I saw quite a lot of activities of the kind that might well have been timetabled in an ordinary school. A group of older children had been invited to invent pop-groups, and were writing songs and publicity material for them; a bunch of younger ones spent time one morning planting seeds with one of the teachers. Several adults read aloud to small groups when they were asked to do so. There was also some very good dance, directed by one of the teachers, and a choir, conducted by a parent, that sang well in two parts. What was striking in the dance groups and the choir was the fact that the children had chosen to do the activities rather than being obliged to, which meant that they tried particularly hard. In one of the songs there were solos between choruses, and each soloist sang with individual character, something that is unusual in school singing with children this age, who usually get no further than finding the right notes.

However, most of what the children did was quite independent from the staff. Here are some comments from two children, Mary-Ellen Olsen, aged thirteen, and Sylvia Ross, aged ten.

Me: I remember you saying something about making videos. Did you make videos?

Mary-Ellen: Yeah, we made lots of videos with plasticene people, and we make up plays and video them and we make lots of movies, sometimes.

Me: Were you in the videos too?

Sylvia: Yeah, we do all sorts of - I wasn't here when one time they did a kind of Lost in Space out of plasticene, it was really funny. And we just make up things, normally.

Me: Who plans the videos? Do you just do it by yourselves? Can you just use the camera on your own?

Sylvia: Yeah. You just use it by yourself. Normally you just make it up as you go along, because you don't really ...

Me: It isn't organised by teachers at all when you do those things?

Sylvia: No, we just think of how to do it and we do it.

Me: Are there other things you do that you really enjoy that are nothing to do with the teachers?

Sylvia: Almost everything that I like is nothing to do with the teachers. (Laughs)

I also asked these two about reading and writing.

Me: What sort of books do you like?

Mary-Ellen: Fantasy, I like, and Terry Pratchett. And Judy Blume and - I can't think of anybody else now.

Me: I know both of those so I understand. I like Terry Pratchett a lot. You like Judy Blume, do you? And anybody else?

Mary-Ellen: And Beverley Cleary - I like all the Ramona books.

Sylvia: I like Beverley Cleary because she's all funny.

Me: Do you find you ever need to write anything, or do you only write because you have to write at school?

Mary-Ellen: I write all the time, because I write stories at home, but I won't let anybody see them so nobody knows what they're like. But I like writing.

Doing what might normally be considered school work at home was not unusual. One of the girls in the top group who had written an excellent song called *Dictionary of Fate* for her fictitious pop-group took her maths book home with her, to work through with a friend. Maths was not only something she did at home, it was also a social activity. I was told that the standard of maths in the school was high.

However, anything that looked like conventional school work was the exception rather than the rule. Most of the time people played. There were people up trees, and people playing imaginative games and chasing games and hiding games, and people play-fighting or telling each other stories or playing football. While I was there, there was no cycling or roller-blading or skate-boarding; apparently such things go in crazes. More remarkably, there was no playing of computer games. At times all the computers have been in use for games all day and every day, and at least one of the staff has worried about whether this was something that responsible adults ought to forbid, in

spite of the traditions of the school. At the time of my visit, though, computer games had not been used much for two or three years.

If people are left to decide on their own activities, they don't usually do a little bit of everything every day, they do one or two things until they have got all they want from them. Sometimes at Tamariki there are no adult-initiated activities for weeks on end; at other times almost everything seems to start from the staff or parents.

On my second day in the school I had an interview with two eleven-year-old friends called Josh Glue and Bradford Brizzell. It gives a good impression of the way they spent their time, including the way Bradford, an extremely sociable, lively and assertive person, spent his time while he was actually being interviewed.

Me: Do you like being at school here?

Bradford: It's better than any other school, in my opinion.

Me: But why do you think that?

Bradford: Because you've got a freedom of choice, and so you can have more fun and more education for learning in my opinion, even though you don't learn much.

Me: What do you mean when you say you don't learn much?

Bradford: Well, because you only have classes when you want to, therefore you don't have very many classes, do you.

Me: So, can you read?

Bradford: A fair amount.

Me: And do you do some maths sometimes?

Bradford: Oh, I'm really really good at maths.

Me: Well, those are the only two things that really matter, aren't they. What about you, Josh?

Josh: I can't spell.

Me: Do you go to many lessons, or no lessons, or ...?

Josh: I have lessons occasionally.

Bradford: He reads lots.

Me: What sort of things do you like reading?

Josh: Books.

Me: What sort of books?

Josh: I can't ...

Bradford: The *Doll in the Garden* and things like that.

Josh: I read some books. I read a lot of different kinds of books.

Bradford: Can I have my opinion on it? Well, he reads a lot of teenager and adult books and things, so he reads quite a lot. [He notices somebody making faces at him.] Hey, why are you - Anybody got something to throw? Seb, do you mind if I throw this at Josh James?

Me [to an enquirer]: I'm just interviewing people about the school.

I'll interview you if you want later on. I'm doing Bradford and Josh at the moment. So do you read at the school, or do you read mostly at home?

Bradford: Even even.

Josh: Mmm. Mostly at home, though, actually.

Bradford [to a friend]: I'm having an interview.

Me: Do you remember when you learnt to read.

Josh: I just remember reading the little Sunshine books.

Me: So did you have lessons or did you just learn by yourself?

Josh: I had lessons to read. With Jane.

Me: What sort of things do you like doing at school in the daytime?

Bradford: Well, playing Magic. Playing wrestler, and barrel-bashing, and things like that. Play-fights and - well, lots of things. Ah, there's my Mum - Mum! Mum! Mum, come here, come here, come here!

[His Mum did not obey.]

Me: Do you like doing the same sort of things as Bradford does?

Josh: Well, I don't really like playing barrel-bashing very much, but I like playing Magic.

[Barrel-bashing is a game where two of you hang onto a high bar and stand on small metal barrels, and try to push each other off while keeping your own barrels under control.]

Bradford: I've forgotten what I was going to say. Oh, I like being able to swear.

Me: Do you think that you learn things here that you wouldn't learn in an ordinary school?

Bradford: Yes.

Me: Can you think what things they are?

Bradford: Well, not really education, as such, like reading, writing, spelling and maths and things like that, but - well, where was I? - Well, you learn to be calm and it takes down your temper quite a lot, and you learn some good communication skills and things.

Me: Can you think of anything different, Josh, that you learn here that you wouldn't learn in an ordinary school?

Josh: I don't know.

Me: What do you think of school meetings.

Josh: School meetings, the meeting idea?

Me: Mhm.

Josh: That's cool.

Me: Why?

Josh: Well, to discuss things, why people aren't seeing to their stuff and things like that.

Bradford: I can give my opinion on that. Well instead of just presuming that there's trouble-makers there, they actually sort it out and see what's actually happened and they see both opinions, and things. So that's what's good about meetings. [There is another interruption] Have you got something to bloody throw? This is - [Turning back to me] That was a joke, that. And

plus you get to know practically everybody because there's a small amount of people, so you get to know practically everybody in the school, which gives you a variety of different communication skills and things.

Me: Do you play mostly with people the same age as you?

Bradford: I haven't finished yet. And there's a variety of different personalities, depending on who you're with and what your mood is.

Me: So do you play mostly with people the same age as you, or all sorts of people?

Bradford: Well, yeah, all ages, all ages really.

Me: Do you know what you're going to do when you leave this school?

Bradford: There's lots of things. Probably go to high school. After that you mean?

Me: Mmm.

Bradford: Well, for some of the things that I'd like to do I'm going to probably have to go to university. Because I want to be an architologist, I think the word is, I've forgotten the word. [Intervention from Josh.] And I'd like to work at a zoo because I was sort of thinking vet on the younger ages, but now I can't really be a vet because blood I'm terrified of, especially if it's my own, it makes me sick.

[Indistinct comment from Josh, and laughter.]

Me: Do you know what you want to do, Josh, in the end?

Josh: When I leave high school I'd like to learn something, something at the university or something. I'd like to draw stuff, you know, be an illustrator of books or something like that.

Bradford: He would make a good comedian.

Me: Do you do a lot of drawing now?

Josh: Yeah.

Me: What sort of drawing?

Bradford: Goblins, orcs, monster thingies. Almost as good as Bob's ones up there, as the ones that Bob drew up there.

Me: Do you reckon you get more time to do drawing here than you would do if you were in an ordinary school? If that's what you want to do?

Josh: Yeah.

Bradford, I need hardly stress, was not in the least in awe of me. He was able to be entirely himself, friendly, rather rowdy, eager to please and determined that Josh's successes should be recognised. He was also delighted to see his mother, which showed an unusually balanced relationship between his school self and his home self. Josh was much more restrained, and possibly even a little embarrassed by Bradford's exuberance, and therefore even briefer in his remarks than he might have been alone.

At Summerhill, Bradford and Josh would have been at what Neill called the gangster age. Pat Edwards would say that they had already passed it. In her experience rebels are usually between seven and ten, when they want to test

out their own courage and break rules. There might be ten meetings in a day about one particular person's irritating behaviour, seeking power and creating a nuisance, and by 9½ some children may be quite callous. Pat's view is that adults must not be moral with them, because they need to explore right and wrong for themselves, and find out what it is in them that can lead them to do things that they themselves see as wrong. This leads to greater understanding - they learn that they can hurt people, and then they learn to control this ability - and between ten and twelve they reach a great maturity, and if they do something unpleasant they are able to acknowledge it and make reparation. At nineteen or so they see a difference between themselves and those who were not at Tamariki. The others have to do at nineteen what the Tamariki children did at nine.

The meeting system, and discussion of rules, are a very important part of education, particularly if adults do not intervene. Meetings have to be about incidents, and not about people, and there are no punishments, only consequences. If a meeting has been called because you have been upsetting someone you may be asked to make an assurance that you won't do it again, or, if you can't make that assurance you may be asked not to play with that person for a certain length of time, and perhaps even to agree to the distance that you must maintain between you. If you feel better about each other before the time is up, you call another meeting to announce your reconciliation.

The great lesson to be learned is that unless you secure everyone's comfort to some degree, your own desires are going to be in jeopardy. As Pat said in several different contexts during my visit, you can't have things without a price.

One of my most enjoyable experiences at Tamariki resulted from the enthusiasm of a group of eight- to ten-year-old girls for a video of the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*. They had watched it several times, and knew the story and the characters well, so they had decided to video their own version of it. As I was in the school and could play the piano they decided they would do the ball-room scene straight away. The first thing was to dress up, and with the ordinary random collection of dressing-up clothes that they had in the school they made themselves look surprisingly Austenian. They arranged themselves in two lines in the meeting room and I sat at the piano. Early nineteenth century dance music is not my usual idiom, but I did my best with an improvised folk-tune in clear four-bar phrases, and off they went. Four or five run-throughs were enough to establish a dance routine that ran fairly smoothly, and it was videoed straight away. The whole process had not taken more than an hour or so, and although no one could describe the result as polished, it had been great fun and would obviously remain in everyone's memory for a long time.

All this was entirely without staff support. It made me think hard about what we mean when we say "play" and "work" in a school context. It is extremely difficult not to think that learning is what children do with grown-ups, under instruction, and what they do on their own is play. This applies, for instance, to building dams in a stream: if an adult instructs a class to build dams it is work; if children build dams on their own it is play.

That is why it is so difficult to accept that children are learning when you first see them at a school like Tamariki. They may be playing football, but they are not playing football "properly". They may be playing Magic, but that is not being taught anything. It is only in the dance class, or the singing group, or the English lessons that children actually do any work, you feel. The idea that it is only when they are under the control of an adult that children ever actually stop learning seems completely foreign, but in fact when we were at school ourselves we all spent hours of inactive boredom in classrooms not listening to teachers, not learning anything at all, simply sitting quietly and wasting time.

For some reason we feel that children watching TV under adult instruction are working, whereas children watching TV on their own are idle. This brings us to the absurd conclusion that the group at Tamariki who were watching *Pride and Prejudice* and then dressing up in period costume and doing a dance were wasting their time, because there was no adult telling them what to do.

The press have generally been kind to Tamariki, but television, on the one occasion a crew was allowed into the school, was actually malicious. The programme was part of a series on leisure, and the angle was to be that schools needed to equip people to cope with not having a job. At the time the TV crew arrived there was a craze in the school for mud-fights; the children had controlled them very carefully, making masses of rules, including one which restricted the area in which you could play. The TV crew, however, neither recorded nor obeyed the rules. They managed to persuade two children to throw clods at the camera and used this shot at the end of the programme, with a voice-over saying "Is this the kind of citizen we want to produce?"

It might have been fairer to compare children from Tamariki with those from other schools when they all transfer to high school at the age of thirteen. Many people would expect the Tamariki children to be at a serious disadvantage, but the evidence I have collected points the other way. This is the opinion of a girl who was soon to leave:

Me: And you're going to high school next term?

Mary-Ellen: Yeah. I'm going to Hegley.

Me: Are you looking forward to it, or are you worried about it?

Mary-Ellen: Both.

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Mary-Ellen: Yeah. I'm going to Hegley.

Me: Are you looking forward to it, or are you worried about it?

Mary-Ellen: Both.

Me: Why?

Mary-Ellen: Just because I might not be able to keep up with the work.

Me: Not for any other reason, not because you think the atmosphere in the school might be different.

Mary-Ellen: It is different. All schools are different. And all my brothers and sisters went there too and they said it was quite good, and so ...

Me: They were at school here before as well, were they?

Mary-Ellen: Yeah, and so came here and then they went off to Hegley. And they liked it.

Me: Are you seriously bothered or do you think it is really probably going to be all right?

Mary-Ellen: I don't know. Just - I do have some feelings about it, but not much.

Me: Did your brothers and sisters find they had difficulty keeping up when they arrived?

Mary-Ellen: No, not really. They were pretty good.

And this is the opinion of Chrissie Brizzell, who had spent almost a year in high school:

Me: What has struck you most about going to the high school? What's the biggest difference?

Chrissie: Well, everyone's really horrible, none of the kids are really as friendly as much, and all the teachers are really grumpy and it's like "go to classes", which is really annoying, it's boring, you're not allowed to wear - like you have to wear uniform, you're not allowed to even wear any jewellery or anything, you're only allowed one pair of ear-rings, and then no rings and anything like that, and I go and say "Are you allowed to wear bone-carvings?" and they say "Oh no, you're not allowed to wear bone-carvings unless they're tucked in underneath all your clothes and no one can see them." All dumb stuff like that.

Me: Did you find the work hard when you changed over, or not particularly?

Chrissie: Yeah. It was quite hard. But it's not really hard any more. It's just sort of normal.

Me: So what was particularly nice about being at Tamariki?

Chrissie: Everyone was friendly, and, like, none of the teachers were grumpy. Some of them were but not all of them, and like you could - all the kids were more friendly. And like you didn't have to go to dumb classes, you could just play and stuff, and it was way more fun.

Me: And you reckon that even in terms of ordinary learning for school you learnt enough to catch up quickly when you got to the high school.

Chrissie: Yeah. It was easy to catch up, basically. It was sort of hard for the first half of the first term, but sort of after that it was way heaps easier.

Two older ex-pupils are more seriously critical of the high schools when they compare them with Tamariki. This is Emma Edwards again:

Emma: It was big and sort of anonymous. And I think I had quite good skills from Tamariki as far as dealing with people, in keeping myself out of trouble, but as far as lots of the kind of cultural academic things that I just had no idea, as far as things like phys. ed., going and trying - you know, going and just not knowing any rules about any ball sports or anything like that and that was a bit of a hard time, just standing on the side and going "Hmmm, don't know what to do," but -

Me: Can you remember particular incidents?

Emma: Yeah. I can remember three of us that didn't know how to play netball, and the PE teacher was dividing up groups and she said "And you Tamariki kids go there that don't know how to play netball, and everyone else do this." And sort of going "Mmmrrrr." I think that was my first - that wasn't the only time, but that wasn't a very nice teacher. I still don't really understand many ball sports or the rules, but it's not really very important.

Me: At Tamariki were there things that you were learning that you wouldn't have been learning in an ordinary school? I mean you didn't learn how to play netball, but what did you learn?

Emma: Great diplomacy sort of skills, and I don't think I would have had the sense that I was an individual that I had being at Tamariki. I don't think that other schools - as far as my experience from high school, you see, because I've never been to another primary school so I don't really know what I'm comparing against, but I definitely felt a difference from being treated like you were a human being and that you had to deal with things at your own pace ... There was more dynamics going. And then you go to another place and it's just pure academia, and you're just in these big groups being herded round and you're not really treated as an individual at all because you have to go to everyone else's standards, whereas at Tamariki it's more your own limits and things like that.

Me: What did you think when you arrived at high school? What did you think of the other children at the high school?

Emma: Ooohhhh. Well, there were lots of very very crazy kids. I remember that. And lots of bullyings and things like that, you know, sort of intimidation stuff that wouldn't have been tolerated at Tamariki. There was a definite sense that you just had to keep out of a lot of people's way, that there was no way that you could make them be accountable. I mean unless they beat you up, and then you could obviously go to the principal and go "Hey, look, I've been beaten up," or something. I never got beaten up, but I did realise there were people you had to stay away from. There were a lot of crazy kids in my classroom. I remember one third-form guy - just having no idea that people could be like that, you know?

Me: Like what?

Emma: Just incredibly unruly or mad or just kind of unhappy.

Me: What did you mean by crazy kids? What sort of craziness?

Emma: Basically just kids that couldn't really control themselves or didn't seem to and couldn't relate to other people. There was this one girl who was a little bit retarded or a bit slow. I'm not really sure what was wrong with her, but she was extremely religious, very very very Christian and was a bit slow and all the kids would really pick on her, and she used to chase us around, like "You're all devils, you're all little devils, you're devils, Satan, Satan." And all this sort of stuff. And the way everyone treated her was really really horrible. It was quite a bullying kind of thing.

Me: What happened to people that tried to bully other people at Tamariki?

Emma: At Tamariki you would get meetings - meetings would be called on you, and all of the time there were other kids - kids would look after each other as well.

Me: And what would have happened to the girl who went around calling everybody devils and getting teased because she was Christian?

Emma: Because she was Christian? Well, it wasn't so much that she was Christian, she would just do these mad things, and I don't think other people knew quite how to respond to her. There were a few kids that were like her at Tamariki, but I don't mean they were all Christians. The same sort of slowness. I don't know what it is or what was wrong with her, but there were kids like that at Tamariki, and I think because it was smaller, the school was small, people get to know each other more, and you could develop some sort of respect, you know, for learning that there'll be people in your life that you may not like, or that you can develop respect for people that you wouldn't in a bigger environment where there's more of a stigma attached to them? Like I remember an autistic boy, and just - you know you could develop kind of soft spots for those people that you wouldn't normally come across because they would be in some sort of special school or something but you were - it's sort of all walks of life. I remember, you know, just going and sitting down beside him, arriving at school, and he'd pull your hair or whatever, and go "Hello, hello, how are you?" He'd pull your hair and start rocking or whatever but, you know, you treated them like your little brothers or your little sisters. You realised that there was something not quite making a six-pack there, but they could still be a nice person.

Emma had left high school some years before. Jessica Cawston wrote the following pieces as English homework when she was still there. Her English teacher was one of the few who allowed her to be herself.

The stones bounce away across the footpath as a girl kicks mindlessly at the gravel along one side of the pavement. There is a look of depression and hopelessness about her. The hunched shoulders, the dragging feet, and, worst of all, the miserable and desperate expression on her face. She comes

to a small street and walks straight across it, looking neither right nor left, causing a car to screech to a halt and the driver to shout angrily. But her face does not change and she gives no indication of having noticed.

Something has gone wrong for this girl. Something has changed deep inside her which has formed this miserable creature from the happy, outgoing person she was three years ago. She is losing a part of herself; in fact it is being carefully removed from her in the hope that she will not notice and become "the perfect schoolgirl" obediently and without fuss. Her confidence is being pulled away, or extinguished, by continuous reward and punishment schemes. At the same time her qualities and characteristics are being twisted and standardised, resulting in "confidence" becoming the courage to say what the teacher wants to hear, not what she thinks, and individuality, the most important part of a person, being somehow converted into being different by being perfect.

She walks straight through a puddle, leaving her clean, white school socks and freshly polished brown shoes sodden and muddy. But again there is no reaction. She is not on this planet, but somewhere else. Somewhere trying to escape the never-ending homework and continual pressure from all sides. Every lecture, every frown, stabs painfully at her, the smiles, meaningless as they are not for her but for the grades she achieves.

Tears trickling down her face she trudges on, towards the very place that squashes her into this painful, unnatural mould. The very place in which she must cover up the frightening, aching truth and "smile," "contribute," "achieve" (and endure) to please other people. Her character is not valued - not wanted, nor her feelings. Only her marks matter there.

"I've probably talked enough about this already," wrote the teacher. "Ideas 4 Style 3." (Ideas and style are each marked out of 5.)

If only I could speak the language properly. If only I could fit in with the complicated guessing game which surrounds education. The roles of student, teacher and parent are clearly set out yet somehow I can't bring myself to appreciate how I am to behave. It is expected that from New Entrance you begin to learn the unique language and customs of the state school system. You must learn your place and know what to say and when to say it. You must learn not to ask lots of questions and not to disagree with the teacher's point of view but sit and let it drift over your head, only answering when asked, only asking when invited to - speaking the language.

The problem, of course, what if you weren't taught the language, what if you went to a school in which they spoke in a completely different way. A free and expressive dialogue with no rules, no conventions, just honesty and sometimes bluntness, where you said "Don't do that, please, it annoys me," or "I disagree entirely," rather than walking away or remaining silent. It is hard to learn a new language when you are thirteen years old; it is hard to

give up your old one and use the new speech all the time. And for someone who has a strong mind, once respected, now disregarded, it is harder still to learn a language which is so cold and indifferent.

Ideas 3/5, Style 3/5

4 Sudbury Valley School

In one important respect Sudbury Valley takes things further than any other school described in this book. Other schools may do without uniform, punishments, religion, compulsory lessons or artificial respect; Sudbury Valley does without lessons altogether. If you go to school at Sudbury Valley, what you learn is how to make proper use of your break time.

That is, after all, a most important lesson if you are to lead a valuable adult life. In western society we spend much more of our time on activities we choose ourselves than on activities set us by our superiors. Some of us manage to do without superiors altogether, and live our entire lives in one prolonged break time - not time for idleness, but time for our own, chosen, constructive activity.

When I first visited Sudbury Valley I had read that there were no lessons, and I had also read the qualification of that statement: "unless children specifically request them". I had failed to appreciate how little difference that qualification made. I expected to see most of the school busy with lessons that they had themselves specifically requested. They weren't. It was break time. In four days I was aware of a karate class, a history class, a French class with three students and a session in the lab in which three girls, under the eyes of a qualified biology teacher, skinned a squirrel with the intention of stuffing it. There were almost one hundred and fifty students on the roll, aged between four and twenty, but, as I realised when there was a fire practice, half of them were not even in the school building.

Yet even in academic terms, Sudbury Valley students succeed. Researchers investigating the careers of all the students who had left the school by the end of 1989 after spending at least a year there, who had stayed at the school until they were at least nine, and were over the age of twenty by January 1st 1991, made contact with 188 (79%) of the 237 possible interviewees. They found that of the students who had spent their entire schooling at Sudbury, 52% had received College or University degrees, whereas only 37% of those who had also attended other schools did so. How on earth are such results achieved?

Let me give a dry, academic description of the place. It was founded in 1968 by a group of parents who had hunted all over the country for a school that met their requirements, and had failed to find one. "The main thing we all had in common," wrote Daniel Greenberg, one of the founding staff members, "was a deep conviction that the existing educational system would do our children irreparable harm". At Sudbury Valley "our children's

activities at school would have to be launched on their own initiative. There could be no externally imposed curriculum, no arbitrary requirements dictating what they should do with themselves."

While I was visiting the school in 1994 there was another visitor there who was starting a similar school in California. One of her difficulties with parents was greeted with the mirth of recognition. "We wanted a free school," said these parents, "but we didn't mean that free." Their specific demands were no sugar, no gun-games and no Nintendo. At Sudbury Valley there are no such restrictions.

It is a day school which, when I visited, had many more children over thirteen than below it. The fees were \$3600 per year, and students also had to pay for materials they use. Each day there were eight staff members officially on site.

The school building is out in the country about twenty-five miles from Boston, Harvard and MIT. It is a 19th century family house with eighteen rooms, set on a slight rise in the middle of a large expanse of grass, bordered on one side by a lake and on the others by woodland. It has a deck around it, in the proper New England style, and it looks reassuringly comfortable. A few hundred yards away from the main building is an old barn, converted now into sound-proof music rooms, a computer centre and a hall for meetings, drama and parties. There is a tarmac area for basket-ball practice, skate-boarding and so on, and a space marked out for four-square. (Four-square is a ball-game comparatively unknown in Britain, in which a large number of children can take part in a small space. It can be a matter of gentle bouncing of the ball from one to another, or it can be fiercely competitive and skilful.) Between the house and the barn is a huge and satisfactorily climbable beech tree.

Inside the house there is an art room, a music room, a kitchen, a dark-room, a laboratory and an office, and a number of rooms of varying sizes furnished more or less as sitting-rooms, many of them lined with book-shelves. The social centre when I was there appeared to be the sewing-room, the largest and most comfortable of the sitting-rooms, where perhaps twenty or thirty people could gather in comfort. There were magazines there, and a chess-board, and a couple of acoustic guitars.

The school is run by a School Meeting, held once a week, at which all staff and students are entitled to be present. Much is delegated to "Corporations", which are groups set up to take responsibility for particular areas or activities, such as the Playroom Corporation or the Music Corporation. The School Meeting makes the rules, but the core of the system for dealing with infractions of rules is the JC, or Judicial Committee, a group of eight consisting of two Judicial Clerks elected by the school meeting, five students chosen by lot from different age-groups, and one member of staff.



The workings of the JC have been clearly described by Dan Greenberg in one of the school's publications, *The Sudbury Valley Experience*.

[The school has] a well-established tradition that all allegations of misdeeds are made by individuals, without the need for any school officials to supplement this course. This is as it has been from the beginning, and as long as there is a full complement of socially responsible people at school - which, in effect, is as long as the school will continue to function according to its basic principles - there does not seem to be a reason to modify this approach. For the sake of a clear record, all complaints are written, and there are plenty of people around who are glad to help the illiterate put into writing their oral complaints, by serving as scribes and assistants.

The next step is the crucial one. At the time the complaint is presented, no one knows whether it is serious or frivolous, whether it does or does not involve a breach of the rules, whether the alleged accused was or was not involved and, if so, whether alone or with others. These uncertainties are the reason an investigation is needed, and the JC ... carries out such an investigation, (as its mandate expressly requires). But the important point is that at this stage what we want is a report on the facts; there is yet no concrete charge, no trial, no plea.

Only when the JC has completed its investigations (and only if it has succeeded in finding out something of substance) is a charge entertained, by the JC itself. It is in the best possible position to zero in on the exact violation that appears to have been committed, and on the exact parties involved. In a very real sense, the JC is properly the school's grand jury, collecting all the evidence, and then preparing charges for trial where there is sufficient reason to proceed. And the very constitution of the JC, being a cross-section of the school, assures everyone of a fair treatment by their peers.

Once a charge has been made by the JC against someone, the wheels of due process can turn, and nothing is to stop them from turning smoothly and promptly. The JC clerk notifies the person charged, and a plea is entered. If "guilty" a trial is not needed, and sentence can be imposed.

If the plea is "not guilty", a trial must be held ... The trial is scheduled by the presiding officer, the School Meeting Chairman, within a day or two of the time when the defendant was notified and pleaded "not guilty"; six disinterested School Meeting members serve as jurors; the JC, as bringer of the charge, arranges for a prosecutor; the accused can defend himself or enlist assistance in the defence; and the trial is open to all School Meeting members, as it should be.

Sentencing is in the hands of the JC. In most cases, the investigation, charge, guilty plea and sentence take place in one continuous sequence, since the overwhelming number of infractions are of a nature where this can take place with no violence to justice. In the few complex cases, a little more

time is needed; but the JC's involvement from beginning to end gives it a unique vantage point from which to come up with a fair sentence, and again its constitution as a cross-section of peers is a critical reassurance of fairness to all who come before it.

The high standard of behaviour that results from this system can be shown by the close attention paid by the JC to even minor offences, and by the fact that most of the offences investigated are indeed minor. This is a consecutive run of JC minutes:

93.586 5/16/94 Graham edited the autoexec.bat file on the IBM. This violates Computer Corp. rules. Graham charged with 1000.08 ["The use of areas designated as the responsibility of a School Corporation is under the jurisdiction of that Corporation."] Guilty. Referred to Computer Corp.

93.587 5/16/94 Alex O. left his bike out.

Alex O. charged with 400.04 ["Bicycles and other wheeled vehicles (such as go-karts, skate-boards) must be put away at the end of each day in bicycle racks or storage areas designated by the Buildings Maintenance Clerk ..."]. Guilty. Warned.

93.588 5/16/94 Nathan S. brought two visitors without permission.

Nathan S. charged with 2000.01 [a general rule giving authority to Clerks, Committees and Corporations]. Guilty. May not bring visitors for the rest of the year.

93.589 5/16/94 Francesca harassed Lane.

Francesca charged with 200.01 ["No one may knowingly infringe on another's right to engage peaceably in activities at school, free of verbal or physical harassment, so long as the activities are in accordance with School Meeting resolutions ..."]. Guilty. Out of sewing room for next day of attendance.

93.590 5/13/94 Julian sat on the sewing room table.

Julian charged with 300.03 ["Abuse of property at school without permission of the owner is prohibited"]. Guilty. Warned.

93.591 5/17/94 Peter H. did not replace the trash can that he moved.

Peter H. charged with 200.02 ["It is prohibited knowingly to disrupt other people's activities in the school ..."]. Guilty. Must do upstairs and downstairs trash next day of attendance.

Not only do these minutes show close attention to details of behaviour, they also show how gentle the sentencing is; most of the accused plead guilty, and many of them are merely warned not to do it again. The behaviour required by the rules seems to be accepted as sensible even by those who break them. And the rules of course were not imposed by a remote group of adults, but were devised by the School Meeting, where staff and students work together. All the same it might have been expected that rebels would reject

even such reasonable requirements as are made at Sudbury. This does not seem to be the case.

The organisational structure of the school is one of its prides. Another unique feature is its diploma procedure, something which gives rise to much heart-searching as it incorporates the kind of judgement that the school seeks to avoid. If leavers want to receive a diploma, they have to defend the thesis that they are ready to lead responsible lives in the outside community without the support of the school. This thesis is presented to a meeting of students, staff and others associated with the school, who may cross-examine the candidate. The diploma is awarded or withheld according to the result of a secret ballot immediately after the meeting.

The occasion is a solemn one. I was lucky enough to attend several thesis presentations during my brief visit, and the flavour of the occasion may be best given by quoting one of them verbatim.

I've been at Sudbury Valley for four and a half years now. I believe that I am a responsible member of this community. I also feel that I am ready to become a responsible member of the community at large. In order to explain why I feel that way, I need to explain what my time here has been like, but I also need to explain what my life was like before I came to Sudbury Valley.

I'll begin with my time at junior high school. I was living in Maine with my Mom, going to school in a small town whose populace had a very narrow view of acceptable behaviour in people, especially young people.

My time there was pretty hard. I was, and always had been, different from the other kids. I was very expressive, which was at once a blessing and a curse. It meant that I did well in school, in art and in dealing with adults, but had difficulty fitting in with my peers, who were very much cut from one mould.

They pretty much cast me out; I guess because I was different and they didn't understand me.

Because I was considered socially unacceptable, I turned to my grades for a sense of self worth. I pushed hard to go for an A+ instead of settling for an A and became very depressed if I got a B on a test. I put a lot of unnecessary pressure on myself; I thought I wasn't any good if I didn't do well in school. Naturally, my obsession with getting good grades worsened my social situation.

I don't want to paint too bleak a picture of what life was like back then. I did have a few friends, and two interests that kept me going: playing the saxophone and running cross-country. Unfortunately, I even had a hard time with my hobbies; I had a lot of difficulty with the sax at first, and consistently finished near the back of the pack at cross-country meets.

Eventually my situation began to change. I started taking private saxophone lessons, and I really began to enjoy playing music. As my playing improved, my music teacher at school took notice and invited me to join the

jazz stage band. I accepted and suddenly found myself playing with the best musicians in the school. Jazz band was very demanding, but I loved it. I was finally good at something besides homework.

About this time I started to get into Led Zeppelin and other classic rock music I hadn't been exposed to previously. I was really psyched about it and decided I wanted to learn to play the guitar.

As I grew, my athleticism began to develop. Two of my best friends joined the cross country team, and we started running together. I was getting faster, and having running partners not only improved my times, it made practices a lot more fun. I began to place at meets. Life was starting to look better.

However, I still didn't know myself very well. I was pretty troubled and uptight and was often sick. I knew I needed a change in my life but I couldn't figure out what to change, let alone how to execute the change. I considered moving out of Mom's place and going to live with my Dad, but I was just starting to enjoy life in Maine. I knew I needed to get away from the public school system which was boring me to death. I liked English and history, but the only things I really loved were running and music, both of which I knew I could do on my own without school.

I really wanted to play baseball; I tried out and didn't make the school's team. I really wanted to learn guitar, but there was no one around to teach me. It was a frustrating time.

I felt very alone as I faced the next phase of my life. It was becoming readily apparent to me that I needed to be around my Dad more. I also needed to live in a place with more open-mindedness and resources. I needed to leave. I knew this, but I struggled with it. For some reason I just couldn't go.

As I struggled internally, I attended school less and less frequently, and my grades began to slip. Since I had been looking at my grades as a reflection of my self-worth for so long, as they dropped my self-confidence dropped with them. I was unable to reverse the slide; school just didn't seem worth it anymore.

My teachers kept talking about my "potential", which was infuriating. I could no longer relate to or deal with school, which I began to perceive as an uncaring monster trying to mould and shape me, make me bland, while at the same time shoving an incredible amount of completely useless information down my throat.

This had been going on for several months when my Mom signed up for a weekend conference in Boston, which is where Dad lived. I stayed with him while she was there, and during the car ride back home to Maine, Mom was all excited about some school called Sudbury Valley she had heard about. We talked about it for almost all of the six-hour drive home. About five minutes into the conversation, I knew I wanted to go there.

That conversation took place on a Sunday. Monday and Tuesday were spent saying goodbye to my friends and packing. On Wednesday, my Mom, my cat and I drove back down to Boston.

On Thursday, less than a week after I first heard about SVS I was in an interview with Hanna Greenberg. I began my visiting week the following Monday, and by the next week I was enrolled.

To this day I don't know what came over me; I made a complete leap of faith, moving when I had never even seen the school. From the start it felt so right that I just had to go with it.

My first couple of months at Sudbury Valley were like paradise. I was finally free, and I knew it.

I spent a lot of time in Callahan by myself during those two months, thinking about what life up to that point had been like. For a thirteen-year-old I had plenty of experience and perspective, but I didn't have the first clue what to do with it.

It was a weird time, because on the one hand I was feeling more comfortable than I ever had, but I was kind of shut down after my experiences in Maine.

I was becoming very outgoing, because for the first time in my life, people were being quite friendly to me, but I was also very closed off. I didn't trust my own judgement when it came to others; I didn't really think I was capable of having a lot of friends. My experiences with people had mostly been painful, so I was really afraid of getting close to anyone.

In spite of these obstacles, I was starting to feel better, because my problems now seemed solvable, and I was finally away from the environment that had held me back for so long. I knew I still had a lot of work to do, a lot of growing and healing and learning, but I knew I had time to do it; no one was telling me what to do with my time anymore; and I knew things were getting better.

Summer rolled around and I finally made it on to a baseball team, which was sort of a personal triumph that seemed symbolic of how I was starting to do things I never thought I'd be able to do.

As the 90-91 school year began, my confidence was boosted by several good summer experiences, like getting a job, playing on what turned out to be a league champion baseball team, and forming a strong connection with my sister and my Dad, neither of whom I had really known before that time. I played a lot of four-square that year, and a lot of jazz with Dan, Dick and Mike Matisoo [members of staff]. I was usually only at school for the minimum five hours per day; I wasn't comfortable here for longer periods of time. I really wasn't comfortable enough within myself, yet, to be around other people for extended periods of time.

However, I was already reaping the rewards of a Sudbury Valley education. I was doing things I was passionate about, and always learning about how to relate to other people. I was forming the foundations of some friendships that would turn out to be extremely important to me.

Some interesting memories of 90-91 at Sudbury Valley are of me starting to make friends, trying to be friends with everybody and not really wanting anybody to get too close. That may not make a whole lot of sense, but that's

what I was doing. Two things were written in my yearbook at the end of the year that changed some of my perceptions of myself and how I related to others. One of them was something my friend Margaret Hart wrote: "Don't listen to all the shit some assholes give you because they are assholes and they don't know you at all. Keep being enthusiastic."

I loved that. It was like, do your thing, and if they don't like it, screw 'em. I'd actually been thinking that for a couple of years by then, but had never stated it or had it stated to me so directly.

The other was something Ben Draper wrote. Ben and I had had a lot of trouble over the course of the year and I thought he was kind of a jerk. He always said I was a tight ass, I was uptight about everything. He wrote: "I know I call you a tight ass sometimes, but that's 'cause you are sometimes, but that's okay."

It was that last part, that "that's okay" that took me by surprise. It took me a little while, but I finally realised that I could be a tight ass or not; people would still like me either way, as long as I was being myself.

Summer came and again I spent it about as I had the last; my team was champion again, and I played a much more central role this time around, so I was feeling good about myself in regard to baseball. I talked about life with my sister and my Dad and I continued to learn a lot from both of them. Having some distance now, time-wise, from the difficult experiences I'd had, I started to really get over them.

As I got ready for the 91-92 school year I realised that I wanted to devote more of my energy to figuring out who I was, what I was about, and what I liked. I wanted to experiment.

I had a very diverse year. I got serious about guitar, learned how to downhill ski, started karate, took several different classes, started reading about psychology, went on a cross country ski trip, was JC clerk, and continued playing sax and baseball.

And while a lot of cool things happened that year, there were a few difficult things as well. I had a hard time with some of the new things I was trying, and I was changing so fast I could barely keep up with myself. I was having a hard time relating to people.

That year was really when I started to take charge of my life; I was doing things I'd always wanted to do, and I was starting to succeed at them.

That summer I played my last season of baseball. I realised toward the end of it that baseball was beginning to take more of my energy than it was returning. I'd changed over the last couple of years, and my competitive edge had diminished significantly. I wasn't nearly as angry with life as I had been; I really wasn't interested in "winning" or "beating" anyone anymore. I felt confident and secure enough that I didn't need baseball statistics to tell me I had worth. Baseball helped me through some tough times, and I still really loved the game, but it wasn't what I needed. I took the time and energy I had been spending on baseball and devoted them to karate.

This brings me to last year, which was, in many ways, the year that things "came together" for me. I had become very comfortable with myself and my standing in the school community. I had some very close friends, and for the first time in my life I consistently felt really good. I woke up just about every morning looking forward to the day ahead. By this time I was spending eight or nine hours a day at school.

Last year was definitely my busiest school year; I was studying many different subjects, from French to history to Taoism. I ran for and was elected School Meeting Chairman. I was writing constantly, and my guitar and I were attached at the hip. I was getting ready for what life had in store for me; for the past fifteen years I had been completely living day-to-day, not really looking forward to much, assuming that life wouldn't ever go my way. Now life was going my way, and I realised that, if I wanted it to, it always would.

Last year is when I really started to feel comfortable with other people; I started opening up to some of my friends in a way I never had before, and I started to be pretty outgoing. Life was no longer about pain.

Sudbury Valley had given me the freedom to discover who I am, and become comfortable with myself. I know that's a cliché, and it's said in almost every thesis, but it's true.

Karate was becoming a central part of my life. I was really comfortable in my body, having changed from a gawky beanpole to a pretty well-proportioned kid who hardly ever tripped over his own feet anymore.

Knowing I could defend myself helped put some things behind me. I used to get picked on when I was younger, and I never know how to handle fights.

Now I knew how to control situations. I learned how to avoid fights, but if I ever got into a physical conflict, I knew I could protect myself. This was really good for my peace of mind.

Through my martial arts training I've not only learned how to control my mind and body, I've learned how to nurture my spirit. Karate has been, and will continue to be, a very important part of my life.

I spent a lot of time on karate over the summer last year, and I also travelled, hung out with friends, worked and played music. I also continued my education by reading about psychology, which I had by then decided was the field I wanted to pursue in college.

I came to school this fall with an agenda: I wanted to be School Meeting Chairman again. I wanted to get my brown belt, and I wanted to get into Guilford College, a small liberal arts college in Greensboro, North Carolina. By December, all three goals had been met.

Beyond those immediate goals, though, I didn't know what I wanted to do with this year. As it's turned out, I've spent quite a bit of time just hanging out. I've been doing about twelve hours of karate a week; I really love helping to teach, and while I continue to get a lot out of my own practice, I get even more out of passing on my knowledge to people with less experience. When I haven't been at karate class or at my job, I've been here at SVS, writing, goofing around with friends, playing music. This has been an

adjustment year, and if all goes well, I'll be leaving home in August and moving to North Carolina, where I'll attend Guilford in the fall.

Everything I've said up until now has been background, a foundation for understanding who I am and how I've changed during my years at Sudbury Valley. It's also been a foundation for understanding why I feel I am a responsible person, and ready to be a responsible member of the community at large.

I feel that I am in fact ready, and I think I have proven myself a responsible and self-preserving person over the last four years.

To me, responsibility is taking control of your life and your actions, doing what you say you'll do, and being true to yourself. It also means having the courage to make changes when they are needed, and to contribute to your community. I believe that I have shown an ability to do these things during my time at Sudbury Valley.

In moving here and doing the work it took to put a difficult past behind me, I feel I've shown the ability to make changes when they were needed and do the things it takes to deal with things when they don't go in my favour.

By helping at karate, and serving in positions in Sudbury Valley's government, I feel that I've shown an ability to contribute to my community and do what I say I will do.

And by coming to know myself and learning how to take care of myself, I have also learned how to be true to myself.

As wonderful as my time here has been, I feel I'm ready to move on. I'm ready for new challenges, ready to put my tools to use in new environments.

I know some of you will be interested in my plans for the future. As I've said, I plan to attend Guilford next year, and I plan to major in psychology and minor in music. I may get involved in the drama program, as well as the school newspaper and radio station.

I also plan to continue my karate training and the current plan is to test for black belt during summer break after my freshman year. If and when I do receive my black belt, I plan to begin teaching karate, and plan to continue to do so through my college years and beyond.

I don't really know how my life will turn out, long term. My Mom is a therapist and I've always had an interest in psychology. I seem to naturally be able to help people sort through their problems, and I enjoy doing it. Over the last several years I have sometimes been perceived as nosy because of my inherent interest in helping people with their problems. It took me a while to figure out that not everyone wanted to be helped!

However, if I open my own therapy practice, I'll be dealing with people who do want my help, and I think that that could turn out to be a good profession for me.

I also intend to play music until the day I die, and occasionally get stars in my eyes about the possibility of life as a professional musician. However, realistically there's a pretty slim chance of that. I'll continue to play, on my

own and in hands, and if I get a break, I'll go with it, but I've got plenty of backups.

In addition to karate, music and psychology, I'm somewhat interested in the prospect of writing professionally some day; I don't know how or if that will manifest itself, but I have the feeling that it might.

Above and beyond, but also including, whatever I end up doing for a living, my plans are to continue to grow and evolve, and to continue using the tools I've acquired here to be the best person I can be. I think that as long as I have that intention, things will work out all right.

I want to thank everyone here for what you've taught me. I have learned something from everyone, and the support and love this community has given me are beyond price. I will miss you all and I won't forget you.

This thesis presentation is longer than most, but it contains many themes that occur over and over again in the theses presented by others. Many students came to Sudbury because things were going wrong elsewhere, often much more seriously wrong than in this instance. Often the turning point would come after a year or two in the school, as a result of one particular remark or event. Conversation had always played an important part in the candidate's education. Students who come late to Sudbury feel that they are at last given the opportunity to find out about themselves, to accept themselves as they are, and to relate successfully to other people without pretence. As the author of this thesis says, it seems a cliché to say that he became comfortable with himself, because so many other people say the same thing. In tandem with this self-discovery comes the discovery of interests, and a wholehearted commitment to them. Many students presenting their theses discuss what they understand by the word "responsible", and the definition in this particular thesis includes the main points others make: reliability, self-respect, courage, concern for others. By the time they come to present their theses, students usually feel they have learnt all they can from Sudbury, and need new opportunities.

I find it difficult to believe that even the most conventional of academics can believe that it is better to leave school with ten GCSEs and A-levels in History, English Literature and Geography, say, than to leave as a self-aware young person, as this student describes himself, wanting to continue to explore psychology, karate, guitar-playing and writing, to contribute to his community and to become, as he says, "the best person I can be".

When you visit the school, it seems astonishing that so much can be going on there. I heard very little music and I didn't see any serious sport. I was aware of karate classes going on, and a history class. Otherwise I saw children playing, both with toys and with games, and talking, and a few attending JC and School Meeting, and some reading, and one or two people sleeping, and one boy taking a computer to pieces, and a team selling soft

drinks and sweets, and some boys playing computer games, and a girl printing photographs, and somebody juggling and another trying to juggle, and a very few children in the art room, and rather more busy in the kitchen. And everywhere children talking. And talking and talking. And I talked with them, and gradually I realised that a great deal of what they actually studied, they studied at home.

Another young man whose thesis defence I heard, asked himself the questions suggested in the guidelines for those preparing defences, one of which was "How has the candidate spent lots of time?"

I suppose there's two answers for that. First of all, what have I done in school most of the time? I've relaxed. I've played games. I've talked to people. I've electrified deli foods [a practical joke well-remembered by others present]. That kind of thing. But what have I done outside of school? Up until recently, I've studied. I've read books on astronomy, physics, math, biology. I took a college level math course to bone up a little before actually doing the real thing. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to study in school. It seemed to ruin the whole mood.

In his time out of school, this young man had taught himself, among other things, enough astronomy to win a place at the University of Massachusetts.

Students I spoke to were doing all kinds of things away from school - music lessons, drama, computer programming, dance, painting, writing, drawing, reading - and it seemed that many of the children actually did what elsewhere would have been described as school work when they were away from school, and used school principally for socialising. For many of them, I imagine, studying in school would, as suggested above, "ruin the whole mood." Good relationships with other people are of course more important than any ordinary school subject, but most schools are organised to prevent their pupils from getting any practice. Sudbury Valley has turned the conventional system on its head: at Sudbury you can't help learning to socialise, but your academic skills are your own responsibility.

Every day I was at Sudbury, I travelled in on a bus from Boston that was organised by a group of parents. Even the youngest children to use it, who were perhaps seven or eight, behaved with absolute dignity and confidence. There was of course no reason for them to be undignified or anxious, but at that age I would have found it terrifying to get on a bus occupied by teenagers. There was a feeling of social ease that was extremely attractive.

People on the bus had no particular plans as to how they were going to spend the day. They were going to see what was going on, and join in if they felt like it. One boy read all the way to school, and another drew in a sketch-book. It seemed to me, as an adult, so relaxed as to be almost

purposeless; I wondered why the children bothered to come to school at all, why they didn't hang out with their friends at home. No one gave me a clear answer to this, but it seems that the school has an irresistible magnetism, over and above its requirement that its students spend a minimum of five hours a day either at school or on business agreed with the school. Hanna Greenberg conducted a number of interviews with former students, which have been published in *The Kingdom of Childhood*. As they look back, perhaps they are more aware of the Sudbury magic than those who are at present in its thrall. Here are two girls remembering how they spent the day when they were among the younger children:

I would get to school, instantly look for my friends, and start talking. We wouldn't convene and talk about what we were going to do that day; we would just talk. I don't know what we talked about all the time. Different things. What's going on. We talked a lot about each other. We weren't a very materialistic group. We didn't sit around and talk about how we were going to get a new Nintendo. But we did have to talk about what to wear each day!

So a kick-ball day, for example, would be getting there, then waiting around until someone would say, "OK, we're going to play kickball. Who wants to play?" We'd round up people to play kickball and then we would run out and play. The game might not even break for lunch; it might start at ten and go till 4.30! Lunch was a big thing when I was young because we were trading lunches. Even though I was forbidden to trade food, I did it all the time. My father would say he made that for us, so we had to eat it. He didn't want us trading sandwiches for cookies. But it was fun to have certain foods and share them and talk about them. We didn't say things like, "OK, at noon we're going to all sit down and eat our lunch together and talk. And then the rest of the day will happen." We kind of ate lunch as the day went on or didn't eat it at all. Often, either we were too busy and we would eat lunch late, because we'd forget about it; or we'd have a snack at ten and then not eat again until three. Or we'd just eat little bits and pieces as we'd go through our day. We didn't sit down and eat our whole lunch. Definitely not.

Often I ate my lunch in the car on the way home!

When I was really little, I would come in, see what my friends were doing, and catch up on what happened overnight. There would be this mass of little kids in the playroom, and I was one of them. Or we would be roaming around the school doing something. We would play games or read books. We would do puzzles, or we would run around outside, or sit and chat. I don't know what we talked about! I can remember a certain period of time when Linda and I had an ongoing card game of double solitaire, or spit, and we would play cards all day long. We'd have this continuous deck and we would take a break, do something else for a while. There were so many "typical" days, so many different things. Sometimes we'd come in and we'd cook all day with

Margaret. Or we'd go off to a museum. Other days, we'd spend the whole day in the art room. I used the art room a lot. I did clay and I did some painting. Linda and I had sort of a family of stuffed animals, and we made them dishes and everything.

We spent a lot of time outside. Especially in the winter. By the time I was eight or nine, we were outside all the time. In the summer we were either in the beech tree or traipsing around doing something, or playing a big, big game with a group of kids outside. There were a lot of formal games like kickball, where we picked teams and everything. And there were a lot of informal games where we'd just all be doing something together. In the winter we would sled. We had a toboggan my father got for us - it was plastic so it didn't stick - and we would pile about eight or ten or twelve people on it. We would go down the hill, and across the ice when the ice was safe. We would sled all day. We would come in freezing cold, drenched, and we wouldn't even notice. We'd hang our stuff on all the radiators, and then we would sit on the radiators. Everybody. All different ages. Oh, it was a blast! For years and years and years, that toboggan was going across the snow and ice with a million people on it.

The beginning of the day would often be similar for older children.

School was something I looked forward to every day. I'd arrive, check in, see who was in the main lounge at the bottom of the stairs. A lot of us spent time down there. You'd kind of hang around in there for a few minutes, then you'd run up to the smoking room, spend the rest of the day there. Maybe make a few forays out to the pond or the porch. The mood was one of real curiosity, like, "What's going to happen today, what'll happen next?" "Let's go see what's happening over here. Let's go do this, let's do that." There was a lot of free wheeling. People would talk, hatch up little schemes like "Let's make Anadam bread", or "Let's see what animal is being dissected". It was a happy mood.

The fact that the days were not divided into lessons gave children the opportunity to spend long periods on particular activities.

Rather than breaking my day into different studies, it was more like my studies would be broken into days. I'd get into a jag of having to listen to Led Zeppelin and Beatles records and that would last for three days, and then it would be baking apple pies for two days in the kitchen. The following week it would be two days in the darkroom and then three days jamming up in the barn with the band, with little things intermittently through it. One thing drove the next.

The question that always bothers outsiders is "Do the children learn to read? Do they learn what they need to know?" Here is one answer:

I don't recall thinking of reading as *something* you learned. I never saw a kid in a reading class, but one by one my friends would be reading. I'm not sure reading is a significantly different process from learning how to talk. You don't have talking lessons for babies, and they learn how to talk. When you have a lot of books around and kids reading to other kids all the time, people just learn how to read by osmosis. I remember thinking of learning skills in cooking. You learned how to make an apple pie. But, of course, doing it with Margaret was so much more fun than doing it yourself that you never really learned it. You just had her teach it to you again and again because it was so much fun to do it with her!

With photography, I sat down and very deliberately read a small library's worth of books about photography and I taught myself how to do darkroom work. I spent a lot of time in school doing photography. I had always thought I wanted to shoot nature documentaries when I grew up. I thought there'd be nothing cooler than trying to take a picture of an ant in its anthill.

I had never built anything in my life. My parents did not even have tools around the house. I went to the guy who ran the woodshop and I said, "I want to make a nice darkroom. I want to tear out this thing here and put counters there and build this rack here." I had a little design in mind from all the things I had read. He helped me, and those were my only real carpentry lessons. The photolab didn't have any money, and all that was there was an enlarger in a bathroom, basically, and a bunch of trays on a table. We did the whole thing. We found old wood, we took nails out of it, we put Formica on it. It was incredibly cheap: it cost forty dollars. To finance it, I started developing film and doing proof sheets for people around school. A lot of little kids started hanging out in the photolab and learning how to do the darkroom work. From about the age of thirteen until I left school, I was probably in there at least two days a week for all-day printing sessions. The more I did it, the more I learned about it. There's only so much that someone can really teach you about photography or about any art form. The rest, you have to learn yourself. There are very few things I did during that period that are exceptional works of photography, but by doing it all the time I became so comfortable with the medium that, by the time I was seventeen or eighteen, I was starting to do mature work.

The way children used the time to follow up their own particular interests is illustrated again and again.

I would say, on a daily basis, probably half of my time was spent in conversation and maybe another half of my time was spent either reading or with music. I read everything, and I read a lot. I read fiction and non-fiction.

I remember reading Thoreau at the school, which was, of course, very appropriate. [The school is not far from Walden.]

I taught myself to play the recorder. I started when I was twelve. Florence and I would play together at school. Every day, we played baroque music in the flowered lounge. She played the flute and I played the recorder.

Later, I began to find that art was a passion. Actually, that's not entirely true. I was always interested in art and I remember in public high school I took an art appreciation course which really was for older students, but they let me in. But it was at Sudbury Valley that I took off with art, that it became my own. I started doing woodblock prints in the art room. Then I realised that I knew nothing about art history and I started reading art history books. I did it on my own. I don't remember talking to anybody about it.

At some point, Martin and I got into building models. Our new thing was war. We built tanks, planes, boats. We started off just doing very simple things but then, after a while, we started getting very intricate models and painting every little detail, so when you finally finished it, it looked like the real thing. We learned a lot from my father, who's been a big World War II buff as long as I can remember - things like why they built a particular kind of truck, as well as why the war was. I learned a lot about the overall history. I don't enjoy fiction unless it's science fiction, but I read a lot of history books and technical books.

I've always been fascinated by the romanticism of medieval England and France. I also like plays, and I kind of see those as more like science fiction, "fantasy things." Plus, at one point, Dungeons and Dragons totally engulfed my life. It was probably from fifteen through seventeen that I was really into that.

One year, I made a film with Neal, a former student. That was so much fun. He wrote the film, and I starred in it. Some time before that, during cleaning, we found some art that he had done in the art room, caricatures of people in the school; a strip called "Rat Man". We thought they were wonderful. We always looked up to him as a big rock star and everything. So when he came to school and held auditions, we auditioned. He picked me! "I'm gonna be in a movie!" Just doing the whole thing was so exciting. We got to see how a movie is put together.

There weren't that many kids in our neighbourhood, so at home I read constantly and I watched some TV. The best thing my parents ever bought me was a set of encyclopaedias. I'm sure I wore out most of the pages. I'd go grab a letter of the alphabet and just sit down and start peeling through the pages and think, "Wow, I didn't know this!" Or I'd follow something through. I'd read the article and then at the bottom it would say: "See this, this, and this," and I'd go read those and keep going. I was probably about fifteen when I really started doing it.

One of the contributors to *That's All, Folks*, the book I edited about Dartington Hall School, also recalled educating himself from an encyclopaedia. It implies an eagerness to learn that conventional lessons seem to destroy; my feeling about encyclopaedias is that they are unreadably dull, but perhaps I ought to think again.

There are two more special features about Sudbury Valley that must be mentioned. The first concerns the staff, and the second the admissions policy.

Every year all the staff have to stand for re-election, and every student in the school has vote. This is not quite as alarming for the staff as it at first sounds, as generally there are no competing candidates, but it offers a smooth, formal way of getting rid of adults who plainly do not fit into the school, and gives the students absolute authority to decide when that is necessary. Their control over their own learning extends to the right to appoint the teachers they need, and to dismiss the inadequate and the supernumerary.

The school's admission policy is absolutely open. There are no conditions for candidates to fulfil. This means that it takes many children who have failed in the conventional school system, sometimes to the extent of refusing to go to school altogether. It takes children with psychological difficulties, and children who have been abusing alcohol or taking drugs. While they are at the school they have to obey the rules - no drugs, for instance - and they may be suspended for breaking them, but they are admitted without reserve, and for many of them the school provides salvation. When I visited the school this particular aspect of its work was invisible. I saw only occupied, lively, talkative young people; if any of those I met had had severe difficulties, they seemed already to have evaporated. In many thesis defences you may read how failure, misery or addiction have been replaced at Sudbury Valley by health, happiness and success, and how the students concerned have gone out into the world ready and able to lead responsible lives in the outside community.

5 Bramblewood School

Bramblewood School is not called Bramblewood. Of all the schools in this book it is the only one that does not want to be known by its real name. When other people have written about it, there have always been too many visitors, too many telephone calls, too many people wanting to join. One of the residents put it like this:

What bothers me is the people that fall in love with the place that want to move in here and we get stuck with them. Some people are great assets to this community and others are just a pain in the ass, freeloaders who don't want to pay any of their bills. It's really not that much money and they just happen to show up here and all of a sudden they don't pay - they've forgotten.

All the names in this chapter have been changed except my own.

I was lucky to get in. The previous year the Wilson family from Bramblewood had been touring Europe, and Ben had written to ask whether my wife and I could offer them a place to stay. We found out that we had a mutual friend so we invited them to come to our house, and we got on really well together. If I had written to Bramblewood as a stranger and asked to visit in order to write about it, my request would almost certainly have been refused.

Bramblewood School is not only not really called Bramblewood, it is also not really a school. However, it was a school to begin with, and as some of the residents insist that it is still a school, I must explain exactly what I mean. It is no longer a place that children visit by the day or by the term; it is a place where children and their parents and other adults live and learn together. It is a place where people have their homes. In 1996 there were about sixty residents of whom slightly less than half were of school age or younger.

It is in the southern half of the United States, about thirty-five miles from a large town which I shall call Bristol. Bristol provided most of the students when it started as a fee-paying day school in 1969. The educational practice of the school was to be based on the ideas of A. S. Neill, John Holt and Maria Montessori.

The corporation responsible for the school owned 170 acres of young woodland, planted in the 1940s, with a couple of old tumbledown buildings in the middle of it. Most of the trees were oaks and junipers, and the soil was almost entirely sand. The track leading to the buildings crossed a small river, and the first priorities were to build a bridge and a new schoolhouse. The staff had to build the school as well as teach there. Everything had to be built as

cheaply as possible. Reclaimed timber, strips of barked planking from the saw-mills that were sold for a dollar a truck-load and new economical techniques, such as spraying burlap with foam, were used to construct a large central building, now known as the Base.

Jamie, an ex-student now living at Bramblewood, gave me a run-down of the history from then on.

We had a main building that was built in '69. It was the main school house. It was going to be: drive the kids in on a school bus, have classrooms set up there, have a structure, have a lunchtime, have - kind of like a regular school, and that's how it started. We had a couple of showers as school showers, and then from there it evolved into a couple of cabins where teachers would live. It was too hard for those teachers to come in and out every day, so they started living on the land. The land was still owned by the school, they didn't own it, so they built small, temporary structures because they believed in what they were doing. From that point the Base turned into somewhat half school, half kitchen. Those people that lived here needed a place to shower and a kitchen and stuff like that, because all they had in their house was electricity. Actually at one time there was no electricity here, but after a while they finally wired electricity to their house, and that was it, still not water.

In 1969 the people that were alternative thinkers were, you know, hippies from the hippy movement, during the Vietnam war. This place was founded for educational purposes, so along with that came people that believed in saying no to the system, and all laws weren't necessarily to be followed, such as the use of marijuana and things like that. We didn't use it as the Indians do in a spiritual, religious way, but we used it in a recreational alternative-thinking way. We did have a little bit of a problem here with some of the kids that came in on the school bus that were from the city that would bring and transport things on the bus, which we never condoned because we were responsible for these children. However, we also had problems with the kids walking through the fields and bringing back mushrooms, picked from the cow-dung that was there. After some hard rains there were days that they were bringing back a normal-size garbage bag of these hallucinogenic mushrooms, taught how to pick them by their parents that were from the hippy generation that lived in the city. Sometimes they were bringing grocery bags full and trying to take them home to the city.

Over the years this problem has diminished at Bramblewood and increased in the city. One of the reasons for keeping your children at Bramblewood now is to avoid the drug problems in the schools in Bristol.

Finance, though, was a problem that demanded immediate solution. By 1976 there were eighty-two children at the school between the ages of six and eighteen, but the buses cost more than the school could afford. Some families

were already living on the site, and children who came in by the day did not have the same serious approach to the community as those who lived there all the time. Some parents couldn't or wouldn't pay the fees, and for a time Bramblewood, being a generous place, let them get away with it. In the end the bus went, and parents from Bristol had to figure out how to get their children into school. Some decided they would have to build their own houses there and move in.

When the school bus stopped it was a real tight close-knit community. Our family had been here almost since the beginning but there were a few other people that were before us. From there it evolved from what the school used to be, where they would have meetings just regarding the school function. The meetings went on to "Hey, how are we going to improve the land? How are we going to live here?" And soon it was "OK, now we live here, we know we live here, we want to teach our children that are here. If people want to bring their kids in in their car then we will teach them too, but they'll have to car-pool." For a while we had five cars coming here in car-pools, bringing a bunch of kids, but that was too hard because the parents would have to come in, and go back, and then come back and pick up the kids, or they would have to stay all day, and these parents had jobs. So that stopped and then they just taught their own kids that were here.

After that it turned into a little bit bigger community - there were about ten cabins. And now we're about forty cabins, about forty families - forty or fifty cabins, I don't know how many there are out there. There's electricity wired all over the place, water piped all over the place. The problem is that we're outgrowing our electrical supply and our water supply at the moment. That's changed in a bad way. What's good and bad is that we're turning more independent from each other. We're not as close-knit a community as we used to be, but therefore we don't beat one issue into the ground. We don't say "You have to think how I want you to think," or "We need to do this for the school." More now we have general buildings that are for general use, like the Base, and a couple of school houses and a shop. If something is going to be done to those places then we'll have a meeting about it, but there was a time when we would even have meetings about your cabin. "Can you build on your cabin? There's a housing code here, you know." Now it's like "This is my house." It's evolving more into a village than a community. That's my opinion. And I think most people you'll ask will tell you that. Whereas we reside real close to each other, we're a lot closer than neighbours and we've known each other, some of us, for ten, twenty years. We can walk naked if we want, you can skinny-dip in the pool, it's fine, we're like brothers and sisters, but we still respect people's rights in their own homes, and their privacy and things like that, and I think I like that better.

Only certain kinds of people will want to live in a community in a wood up a dirt track in a house they have built themselves with no mains drainage, but Bramblewood still has a surprisingly wide variety of personalities. Although there are many crafts-people, a tarot-reader and two midwives (home births are emphatically discouraged by the establishment in the US), there are also people who have mainstream jobs, for instance a doctor, two teachers, a paramedic (Jamie) and the manager of a café.

The school now serves only the children of people living in the community. It is not in the position of the many alternative schools that have to take difficult children in order to collect their fees and make ends meet, nor is it a school that sets out with deliberate therapeutic intentions. There are no paid teachers. All members of the community pay a certain sum each month for the privilege of living there, currently \$60. If a teacher spends money on an outing or on materials it is deducted from the \$60 and the next month the money is invisibly repaid.

The styles of learning and teaching are flexible. The Wilsons' trip round Europe took place during what would normally have been considered term-time. (It would be possible to say that they were doing geography, history, art and archaeology, or that they were on a prolonged school trip, but there is no need to justify such a trip in conventional terms.) While I was visiting Bramblewood, Lottie Wilson was giving daily lessons in reading, history and science for the children aged between nine and thirteen, and Carol in the next cabin was teaching maths. The parents of the younger children had recently set up a space for a play-group. Some of the older children were having tuition for the exam which would qualify them to go on to college.

The arrangements change all the time, according to who is available and what they want to offer. In 1991 the man who was at that time responsible for the bulk of the teaching had written the following comments in the community magazine:

Something I hear with increasing frequency from parents here is, "I am home-schooling my children." Have we become a community of families that homeschool or are we a school that incorporates a group of families into the educational process? Though the difference may seem subtle or mere semantics, I think there are significant, far reaching implications in either argument, but clearly they are not the same thing. Though the question deserves some decision, at this point I only wish to raise the question for us to ponder. Meanwhile, organised classes have begun again for the middle aged kids at the school house. The gong is rung (hopefully) at 9.45 every morning M - F. Storytime is from 10 - 10.30. The schedule of classes is:

Mon:	Writing/Science
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Tues:	Geog./Math
Wed:	Spelling/Hiking or Gardening
Thurs:	Geog./Science
Fri:	Reading/Math

Carter is teaching the Geog. and Science classes. I have the rest. If you would like to plug in, come and talk to us or the kids.

Now I realise that any time you start having classes in the schoolhouse you run the risk of people (kids especially) thinking real learning only happens in that environment. Using workbooks and standard textbooks as we do serves to further the possibility of that dubious misconception. I have already spoken to the kids about this, but I'm not sure that they fully grasp all the subtle messages the complex situation entails. I'm not sure I grasp them all either. None the less, we have begun. Workbooks and school texts are merely an arbitrary beginning point. We'll see where it takes us. The kids are, as always, eager to learn and would welcome further involvement with the other adults. I understand that Terry and Vince are seeing Marcus for some classes and there is talk about organising some activities for the 3-6 year old set. Do we want a meeting to organise ourselves?

The system described above did not last for long, and a much looser structure took its place.

Whatever timetable or curriculum system the adults may decide to devise, experience is the great teacher at Bramblewood. The environment is safe for small children, and from the age of three most of them are allowed to wander freely from one house to another and to play out in the woods and the sand. There is very little distinction between children and adults, and since children are welcome everywhere they overhear and take part in conversations that they would be excluded from in a more conventional world. The list of editors of the magazine has the names of children and adults mixed up without discrimination. There is always a new building going up, or an old one being repaired or altered, and children are as likely to be working on the site as adults. The children have unlimited time for play, which inevitably involves learning through experience, and will probably include such activities as model-making, role-playing, music, natural history and story-telling. Many people keep cats and dogs and chickens, and there is a communal vegetable garden.

Some of the members of the community practise crafts and sell their produce at Renaissance Faires. These are temporary theme-parks, established on different sites around the country for six or eight consecutive week-ends. They have markets, spectacles, music and opportunities to

practise crafts. There are also games, run by a Bramblewood alumnus, which involve archery and swords, tests of strength and other suitably historical skills. Children see the craftspeople at work at Bramblewood, and many go to the Faires to help out. This means they travel around, from the southern States perhaps as far as Toronto, and learn a little of what work is like in an unpressured, friendly atmosphere.

All this, combined with the lessons that the children describe below, provides a rich education, but the educational experience that surprised and impressed me the most follows from the fact that two of the parents are midwives. When babies are born at Bramblewood, the children are always invited to be present. The midwives will have screened carefully for complications during the pre-natal period, and if there is any prospect of danger the mother will go to hospital. There will always be plenty of people present to explain what is happening; if children become frightened or distressed, there will be someone there to take them away and comfort them. Thirty-one babies have been born at Bramblewood, one of them in the presence of more than forty friends. Every child in the community has seen a baby emerging into the world.

To suggest, in the face of this example, that real learning only happens in a class in a schoolhouse is blatantly absurd. Knowledge of childbirth is so taken for granted at Bramblewood that none of the children I interviewed bothered to mention it unless I asked specifically about it; the only hint would have been that two of the girls thought they might like to become midwives.

Olive Wilson gave me an interview in which she described life at Bramblewood as it seemed to her, at the age of nine. She spoke unselfconsciously and at great length, taking pains to get everything exactly right.

Me: Have you lived in Bramblewood all your life?

Olive: Yes, I have.

Me: And where else have you been, besides Bramblewood?

Olive: Well, I've been to Europe and Canada, and all over the United States. Well, not all over.

Me: Can you tell me the names of some of the places you've been?

Olive: I've been to New York, Arkansas, it's hard for me to remember all these places. Can I tell you some of the places in Europe? OK, I've been to Italy, Greece, Germany, England, Scotland and that's - yeah, that's about all I've been.

Me: What sort of things did you see when you went there?

Olive: I saw Stonehenge in England, and I got to see the Loch Ness, OK, and um, what else did I see? In, like, Greece I got to see the Parthenon, and in Italy I got to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the town of Pisa, and what else did I get to see? I have to remember all these things.

Me: What do you do at Bramblewood when you are not travelling round the world?

Olive: Basically I hang out with my friends and in the summer time we usually go swimming, and we do some classes with our parents, and we hang out together and we do some stuff, and in the winter time we just do almost the same thing except without the swimming. Sometimes we do some crafts, not as much, though, as some people think we do, like "All the people at Bramblewood do so many crafts and all," but really you come out here and then all of a sudden you see all of the kids are just like ordinary kids, they sit around and watch TV and go swimming. Well, not all the time.

Me: And is there any difference between term times and holiday times?

Olive: Well, usually we don't do school on certain days. Like this Hallowe'en we didn't do any.

Me: Do you have friends outside Bramblewood as well?

Olive: Yes, we do. I have some of them in Canada, a couple of them in Europe, and some of them in the States, like a friend of my Mom has a daughter and I'm a friend of hers and I also have a lot of pen-pals - I need to write her a letter. I don't really write too much. I'm not very good at writing letters but I'm trying to because I have so many pen-pals all over the world.

Me: What sort of things do you do in lessons?

Olive: Well, when we have school, like when I have reading, what I usually do is, like, some of my friends will come over and we'll get out like these spelling workbooks and things and we'll start writing down. In our history classes our teacher will get out the book and she'll start to read us stuff and sometimes we have these notebooks and we'll write down these things, so we can remember them, like for Mesopotamia we'll write down certain things that will help us remember what they were about. For the Celts we might write down their art work or something like that. All their stuff. So we sometimes write so we can remember. And there's one part that we wrote all the names of these people so we could remember what they did, like somebody - well I should have remembered this - well, a person that I know I should remember built a thing for his wife, because his wife was from up in the mountains, and she didn't like the low-down valley so he made her a castle called the Hanging Gardens. It was so draped with flowers and stuff that it looked like the gardens were just hanging there. So that's what we do, and sometimes when our teacher is reading the books, we can draw pictures of their art-work and stuff. So that's what we do in class-time.

Before you laugh at Olive for not knowing who built the Hanging Gardens, make sure you know his name yourself. When you are nine the story is certainly more important than the names. And I guess it is more important when you are ninety, too.

Me: Do you enjoy classtime, or would you rather just hang out all the time instead?

Olive: No, I enjoy classes. Like with my math teacher, I enjoy doing that with her. She's a really good friend of mine, and I really like her, so it's fun. I mean it's not like you go "Oh, you got to do class." Some days you go "Oh, do you know, I don't want to do class today," so you don't have to, but usually you want to go. Like if you do a class with other kids, if you don't go then you're going to not get to see all your friends, and then hang out with them. It's like classes are where you all meet and then you go off and play. It's like because if you don't then you're just stuck at home and you really have to get out. Or that's what happens to me.

Me: When there's meetings for the whole community, do you go to those?

Olive: Sometimes if they're really heavy and I don't feel like I want to go then I don't, but sometimes I do go, and I like being there. Sometimes I go but I still hang out with my friends, but we have to be quiet, because the meeting is going on. All the kids are allowed to speak, if they want to they can say something. Sometimes they don't, sometimes they are too shy. I have, before, but nowadays the meetings that I go to are mainly about electric lines and stuff like that, that I don't really care about. I don't really say anything on those.

Me: Are there sometimes things you'd like to change about Bramblewood?

Olive: No, not really, there's nothing really that I'd really want to change, it's all so wonderful now, but there's nothing that I'd want to change, I mean, maybe, you know, the thing is I think it would be good if we had a little bit more classes.

Me: So what is it that's so very nice? Can you say what makes it so good?

Olive: Well, one thing is we have a lot of little ones out here, and another thing is this is not a big city. If you lived in the city there'd be, like, cars everywhere, it'd be really busy. You know even here when you're crossing the roads you have to be careful, because there could be somebody, but you don't have to as careful as in the city, and also it's really nice out here. Like one day we were in the town and I was all hot in town and it was all sweaty and we drove back into Bramblewood and this big gust of wind came and it felt all nice, and it wasn't as hot, and that was one thing that made me say that I really like it out here, and it's fun. The thing that I like most about out here is that I'm with all my friends, and we have so much land that I can go anywhere I want to. In the city if you want go to your friend's house sometimes you might have to drive. Well, here you just have to walk or ride your bike or something, it's not like you have to go in your car. You know how in town sometimes you have to have people walk with you? Here you don't really have to unless you're really young, unless your parents don't want you to go places by yourself.

Me: Are most of your friends the same age as you, or are some of them much younger or older?

Olive: A couple of them are younger than me. Yeah, basically all my friends are around my age.

Me: Do you count any of the grown-ups being friends as well?

Olive: Yes, I do, I count lots of grown-ups. Pretty much all the grown-ups. Minna is a friend of mine, Carol is a friend of mine. Denise is a friend of mine. It's like they're another parent to me. I have all these different parents, and if my parents ever go on a trip or something, I always have all these other parents. It's like "Oh yeah, you can go stay with Minna, Carol, Sara" - all these different people I can name.

Me: Do you do some things to help the community? If everybody's doing some job together do you join in, or if somebody needs help with something that you could do, do you sometimes help?

Olive: Well, if there's a thing like everybody's going to get together and like clean up since we have some garbage around - if everyone's going to get together and you know, clean up around the Base or something, then I go and I help clean up around the Base, yeah. Sometimes some people are adding on to their houses, and sometimes I go down to their houses and maybe help them. Like they have a big thing like a work party, that's what they call it, and we all work on the houses. Sometimes with my friends we pull out nails from boards that we can use, and we do that sometimes. Yeah, so sometimes I do help.

Me: Do you feel that you can decide what you're going to do, or do the grown-ups decide what's going to happen?

Olive: When we're working? Well, really the person who's getting their house built usually decides what's going to happen with their house and we just do whatever little jobs they have available to do. Usually the person who's going to get the house built does it, but like if there's a work party and we clean up trash and we say "You know there's a spot over there that has a lot of garbage, and we might get some people together and do it over there." So people would say "That's fine. That's a good idea." And so yeah, we could do that.

Me: And what about ordinary everyday life. Do you usually just decide how you are going to spend the day?

Olive: Not all the time. I mean sometimes I just go out and see how my day goes and from there on I decide OK, well, now I think I want to go do this, or maybe I want to go do that, and that's usually what I do.

During my visit I was taken to see Baz Luhrmann's film of *Romeo and Juliet* with a party from the school. There was much stimulating conversation in the van on the way back, and the most well-informed of us all was the seventeen-year-old Anita, who later told me about the school from the point of the older student.

Me: Have you been here all your life?

Anita: Yes.

Me: Do you wish you'd been somewhere else for some of it?

Anita: Sometimes.

Me: What makes you wish you'd been somewhere else?

Anita: The lack of people my age. And, well, there's different reasons, but most of it's - yeah, more people. That's mainly what I wish. When I was little I wished I'd gone to public school but now I don't wish that at all. One reason that I don't like public school is also the same reason that I do, in a way. I mean I don't like the fact that they grade kids on how smart they are, but being here it's hard to know where you stand. And in most cases that results in kids having low self-esteem. And they're not very confident about what they can do, even though they're just as smart as most kids that graduate high school. So that's good and bad as far as the grades in public school go. Sometimes I have wished I had gone somewhere else, but most of the time I like the freedom, being able to do what you want, and when you do learn you're learning because you want to, not because you have to. When you have to, it doesn't make you want to learn as much.

Me: When we were in the car going to Romeo and Juliet then you seemed to know so much more about Shakespeare than I ... well, you probably know as much as I know now, certainly miles more than I knew when I was your age. How did you learn it all?

Anita: Well, just by reading, but I'm kind of a strange case. Most people here don't like to read as much as I do, and I've always been into that period, and I just read a lot about it. That's pretty much how I know anything about Shakespeare at all. I've seen a lot of movies too. I quite like movies too. Yeah, and my uncle would have a lot to do with it. That's Agostino. He gets me into those things, he's really into reading and history. We talk about things and we read things and Shakespeare's one of those things. But not everybody here likes to read, so ... Pretty strange.

Me: What would a typical day for you be like?

Anita: It depends. Sometimes I'm doing a lot of classes, sometimes I'm not doing any, sometimes I'm not doing any classes and working, sometimes I'm working and doing classes. There is no such thing as a typical day, but I guess right now I'm studying to get my GED so it's quite different from what it has been. In the past I didn't go too far without doing any classes, but usually I'd do a couple of classes in the morning, then read, for the rest of the day [laughs]. That's how I pretty much spent most of my time since I was about eleven.

Me: What do you have to do for the GED? What does GED mean?

Anita: Well, the GED is like a high school equivalency test. Instead of going to high school you can just take those tests and go to college. And it's just five tests, social studies, writing, math, science, and literature. And you take five tests, and if you pass them, which is supposed to be very easy to do, then you just go on to college. And as far as getting ready for it, I'm taking a class at one of our community colleges, that prepares you for the GED. I've

already taken two of my tests. I'm taking another one tomorrow. I only have two more to go. I'm pretty confident, though.

Me: What's it been like being taught in the community college in a class?

Anita: It wasn't too bad. I had my first experience with the class, like an organised classroom, when I was taking driving lessons and that was very, very hard, especially my first day. I'd never been in that situation with other kids there and so many people in the classroom. I was very nervous my first day, but it was just, like, one day, so after having that experience it was pretty easy to get into the classroom thing at BCC. This one is not quite an organised class like you would have in public school - everybody's working on something different, the teacher just goes at your speed. It's more like a lab, almost, not a classroom.

Me: What are you going to do at college when you get there?

Anita: Oh, I don't know. I don't know at all. I'm going to try to take something kind of easy to get used to it, because again I'm not used to the classroom very much and it's going to be hard to adjust. So I'm going to take something easy my first semester. I'm not sure what I'm going to get into as far as the future goes, but I'd like to learn Spanish and that's mainly what I want to take for a long time. That's what I know so far.

Me: If you'd had friends outside Bramblewood and you wanted them to come to Bramblewood, what would you have said to try to persuade them to come?

Anita: Oh well, I have, and I do, sometimes. Not much. It's kind of a long drive from anywhere, so Bristol is the only place that I have friends nearby. They like it here, I mean most kids when they hear about what it's like here, when they go to public school, their first reaction is: "Wow, you don't have to go to school. That's great, I want to go there." Because they've been told all their life that they have to go to school. But really they're so used to the amount of kids, a choice of friends, they have such a wide variety of people to choose from to play or do things with that when they come out here at first it's fun, but it's hard to get used to because there's not very many people here. So it's not too fun for them after a while. But I'm used to it, so ... you find ways to entertain yourself when you kind of have to. Reading is one of them.

Me: If you could change Bramblewood, is that the only thing you'd change, more people your age?

Anita: I don't know. Bramblewood as a school, or Bramblewood as a community?

Me: Well, start with Bramblewood as a school. Would you change it?

Anita: Well, Bramblewood as a school, I wish we had more money for more supplies and that sort of thing, and sometimes books, that people have to buy. I really think we would have enough money if - it is a community and about half the people actually pay what they are supposed to, to live here, so I think if everyone were to pay the same amount then I think we would have enough for the kids to be able to go on more field trips, and school supplies and books and such. We always had to do a lot of fund-raisers as children, to even go somewhere, and it was fun and everything, but still it was always the

same people who helped, that paid their bills, so it was kind of like they were paying twice, and I don't think that was quite right. That's one thing I would change as the school is, and sometimes I wish there were more people to choose from as teachers. Sometimes there's only a few people here that really are willing to teach you anything, and those people, their schedules are so full, they're teaching all these people on a day, that it's hard sometimes to find a class that you want, but that doesn't happen too often. As a community, just like in the school thing, I wish that more people would care more about putting energy into the school itself, and that's basically what I think is a community, and [laughing] I wish that we didn't argue so much at meetings, and we actually got something done.

Me: Have you taken part in meetings yourself?

Anita: Yes, but I don't speak up very often. I have a hard time doing it. I always have something to say though. Meetings are kind of hectic here. Nobody quite knows who raised their hand first, and we've tried different methods of people talking but usually there's the people in the group who always think that it's their turn and you're interrupting, so I have a hard time getting into the meetings. Even when I was little, when I was a child, I always listened to them and I always had my opinions on the subjects. Actually they do encourage the kids to talk, and they usually - most of the people - take what the kids say just as seriously as any adult, and I've always liked that and we've always been proud of the fact that we do try to listen to the kids and treat them as people instead of just objects in the room. Yeah, I have taken part in most meetings.

Both Anita and Olive had lived at Bramblewood all their lives, and took it for granted, but in the past there had been children who had had problems in the outside world who came to Bramblewood to find relief from them. Lottie's eldest son, now a successful comic book artist, said that coming to Bramblewood after being at an ordinary public school was like coming out of a dark closet. Instead of learning things that made no sense to him, he was able to learn about life. Linda North had found even greater relief. She wrote about it in a letter which appeared in the Bramblewood magazine in 1991:

Bramblewood School: the school of life. To Bramblewood I owe my life. I came to Bramblewood with a wounded soul. I had no hope or belief that I would be loved or love anyone. I came into the arms of BW and was welcomed and held. I found unconditional love. I found hope and relief slowly. I became okay with myself, even started to love me, Linda North. I grew and blossomed and changed. I had support through all the changes. A lot of things still drove me. I still had a lot to learn. I did things I'm not proud of and still received love from my family at BW. My child was born to the community and welcomed. He is a beautiful example of a BW kid. I feel so grateful to you all, even the ones I don't know in my life. I reflect on each

and every one almost every day. There is not a more compassionate and loving group of people in the world. Thank you, Bramblewood!

Love,
Linda North.

The Wilsons live in an adapted geodesic dome, hidden among the twisting, interlocking sandy paths that link the various buildings. Since the community is ecologically conscientious, most of the houses have compost lavatories in outhouses. The Wilsons' outhouse is just out of sight among the trees, and was difficult to find with a torch at night. Three sides were curtained, but one was open to the woods. For the first night or two, before I got used to it, I was woken by the acorns that crashed onto the corrugated iron roof of my sleeping quarters, and the cocks that began crowing at four o'clock in the morning.

Rejection of violence was perhaps the only standard demanded of the community. One family had been asked to leave because the father used to hit his children. People from Bramblewood are also experienced protesters, and I was shown a video of a protest against Operation Desert Storm.

Tolerance, informality and trust were illustrated by the story of another family who had moved out after a year or so because the community was not prepared to run its meetings more systematically, tape-record them and minute them and expel people who did not obey their decisions.

One evening Lottie expected frost, so she went down to the communal vegetable garden and picked all the remaining tomatoes - perhaps two barrows full. The next day she wrapped them in newspaper and delivered them to all the other families. When I commented to someone that I thought this was a very nice thing to do, he asked what else she might have done. I suggested that she might have picked enough tomatoes for her own family and left the rest for anyone who could be bothered to pick them. "Do you know," he said, "that idea simply hadn't occurred to me?"

Agostino, at almost sixty the oldest member of the community, widely read in history, literature and philosophy, teaches and inspires many of the older children. He meditates and fasts regularly, for the sake of world peace. He is always ready to give up his time to be with people who are in trouble. He did not want me to write about Bramblewood, because he felt it was absurd to attempt to put a living, changing community down on paper. When I left I told him, truthfully but somewhat inadequately, that I had been very impressed by what I had seen. He told me not to be impressed, but simply to be glad to have made new friends, and he gave me a farewell hug.

I asked Lottie what happened to ex-students, and the sample list of careers she gave me fell broadly into two types: creative and caring. In the first category came art, toy-making, editing a computer magazine, glass-blowing,

carpentry, decorating and dyeing; and in the second medicine, teaching, fostering and organising a social gardening scheme in Brooklyn.

Jamie described his own experiences, growing out of Bramblewood, getting a training and coming back again.

I decided to start working, at age thirteen, because there wasn't enough for me to do here. The school bus had stopped running when I was about nine. I decided "I'll do my school part-time, and I'll work part-time, so that I can learn something about the work trade, and practise my handwriting, my filing skills and things like that," so I started working in my step-dad's office. I did that from age thirteen to seventeen on a part-time basis, three to four days a week, filing and writing out insurance claims. It enabled me to get some confidence in the business world and learn a trade and from that point on I was able to get a job a little easier.

Around age seventeen I started getting restless. You know, it's close enough to Bristol and I would always be in and out, but at seventeen I started living with a lawyer, a friend of my mother's, who lived in Bristol, so I wouldn't have to commute as much. I hung out there, doing various activities, prepping for my education and doing GED studies. And then at age eighteen I got my GED, took a semester of school at the Junior College, taking various courses. I started with - I still remember to this day - a biology one, a piano class, a typing class, real weird, I mean just totally sporadic, no structure, what I was thinking was "Oh, I like this, I want to take this class." I took a life-guarding class, I took weight-training, gymnastics, and all this in the one semester, and I went ahead and started working as a lifeguard in the city of Bristol at age eighteen, at one of the neighbourhood pools.

At that point I just went to school for a couple of years and worked, and just got tired of Bristol, it was burning me out, basically.

Then I met a girl out here, fell in love, and I built this house at age nineteen or twenty. The bathroom and the other baby room I added on later, at age twenty. Nineteen I built it, twenty, we broke up, after a year.

I went to LA for about a month and tried to pursue maybe radio, television, film to see if I liked it. I loved movies so much that I decided I couldn't do it, because I went behind the scenes of a couple of movies - we have a friend of ours that's a director over there - and I found out that it was taking the movie magic away and I felt like it would influence my love of movies, and so therefore I chose not to, because LA just felt like it would swallow you up. It felt like there was so much money there that you could just rub up against somebody and get some. That's what it felt like, but I knew quite the contrary, that it was hard to make a living there and I was working for a video crew and we did a couple of filmings, interviews with some stars for Italian television, and some other things like that, moved back over here after that month, came, cleaned up my stuff and decided this wasn't the place for me

again, because now I'm single again, I need some action, I need something to do back in Bristol, and then I got an apartment.

That's when I think I finally started to be self-sufficient. My mother always taught me to think for myself, and that's a very, very positive aspect of this place; the children grow up thinking for themselves, as opposed to people thinking for them. I had had the chance to screw up a year at college, and decide I didn't want to do Phys Ed. I went from Phys Ed to Electronic Engineering - and I still like physical education and I still like Electronic Engineering but I chose a medical field because of the excitement of it. At twenty years old I decided I needed to go back to Bristol so I went back for the social aspect, for the social life.

I got my certification as a life-guard again because it was a decent job and I started work at Cameron Spa Pool, which is the nicest pool in Bristol, and did that for about two years, and at the same time I went ahead and re-enrolled in BCC, after I decided I wanted to be a paramedic, and I did the social scene and the single life for a long time, and played for two years at Cameron Spa Pool and in College and I found out that I indeed wanted to be a paramedic because of the excitement of it, because I'm a real high-stress, kind of high-strung, type A personality person, and I knew that, and it just appealed to me the whole idea. I went to school for about a year to try and get accepted and started taking classes. They were prerequisites for that programme. It was a two-year associate degree programme. It's an applied science degree. It's just a two-year degree, but it's a national certification and state, local, and so I went and did my prerequisites.

I did very well so they accepted me with all these prerequisites. I showed them that I was serious about the programme and I went ahead and they accepted me - it was like 240 applicants for a 30 position slot, and I found I was accepted. I did that for two years.

At the same time as going to school I started working in a drug-research type place that was specialising in allergy-type medications and asthma. It wasn't like your general drug study place. I did that for pretty good pay for about two years. I'd do vital signs, you know, blood pressures and things like that. And make sure nothing happened to the patients. Twenty, twenty-five patients I was in charge of for the night. I'd work from seven in the night to seven in the morning, I had this night shift.

I finally became a paramedic, and I worked for the city of Bristol. I worked for another ambulance courier crew that were basically just a transport service in that place at the same time. Did that for six months of my life and ended up not clearing the rookie status. I needed a certain grade to clear and that was kind of a real crush to my ego, just that I wasn't going to make it so I quit, and looking back on hindsight I'm glad that I'm not there. I've had another job for the last three years as a paramedic in a medical facility, a minor emergency clinic in Bristol. It's better pay and it's a lot less stress and I have friends there.

I do that right now four days a week and I have Saturday and Sunday and Monday off, because my family is real important to me and I just work thirty-two hours a week. That affords me about a new car and my car bill and my cheap rent here and my wife gets jobs here and there. Now she's working week-ends. That basically gets me to the point I am right now, which is twenty-nine years old, I have a two-year-old, a wife. I met my wife through my mother about three years ago while I was working as a paramedic, actually, three and half, four years ago. We fell in love, got married, had a kid, went to the Bahamas. It's just a nice little dream that we're living and we have a lot of fun doing it.

The children at Bramblewood were happy, self-confident, considerate, thoughtful and extremely articulate, but the community was modest about its achievements. I asked Jamie whether he thought the school had helped him to find a way of life that he obviously very much liked, or whether he regretted not having been at a conventional school. This is his reply.

I try never to have any regrets in life about anything. That's number one. That philosophy was taught to me by my mother and partially the school. There are a lot of people that have a bad taste in their mouth about the school and there's a lot of people that excelled. I feel that that's the same anywhere that you go. You can go to public school and you can get killed there, and you can go to public school and you can be an honours student valedictorian and go on to be a doctor or a lawyer or a famous scientist. Most of the population is from public school. And I think what was emphasised most in this place was that you can be whatever you want. It doesn't matter what your parents are, it doesn't matter what someone tells you to be, you need to think for yourself.

It would be possible to imagine that Bramblewood is a village that has not yet started a proper school because it has not yet discovered how convenient it is to get rid of its children during the daytime. In fact it is a much more extraordinary institution - a school that has started a proper village because it has discovered that cutting off children from their families and communities is not generally a sensible way of helping them to grow up. Of all the schools in this book, it is the least like the conventional image of a school. It suggests that when we lose our last preconceptions about what school ought to be, we may end up even further from the historical model than either Summerhill or Sudbury Valley.

6 Countesthorpe Community College

Countesthorpe College is a state school in Leicester for thirteen hundred students from fourteen to eighteen years old. It was founded in 1970, and for about five years, from 1976 to 1981, it demonstrated the success of an exciting educational theory. It was democratically run, there was social equality and co-operation between staff and students, the students chose their own subjects and methods of study and, as well as all that, their results in the national examinations were excellent.

In 1981 a new head was appointed, and before long it was being described in the magazine *Lib Ed* as "the least democratic and most patriarchal school in Leicestershire." A system which had ended truancy and given children a real sense of purpose in their learning was replaced by one in which students were once again required to spend their time in an endless sequence of timetabled lessons, merely behaving as if they were learning. Conflict between students and teachers re-emerged as a normal aspect of school life. (See Lorna Chessum's contribution, *A Countesthorpe Tale*, in *The Democratic School*, edited by Clive Harber and Roland Meighan.)

During its brief Golden Age there were two sides to Countesthorpe's uniqueness: a political one and an educational one. There were times when they conflicted. Teachers and researchers who have written about the school have generally concentrated on the political side - the delegation of authority, the redistribution of salary points to create greater equality among staff members, the involvement of all the teachers in decision-making and the strong union representation. John Watts, head of the school from 1972 to 1981, was relieved of his post by the local authority. He attributed this to a political breakdown within the school. During the school year 1979/80 the staff had decided to support national union action during lunch-breaks by withdrawing their supervision and thus making it necessary to shut the school during those breaks. The students had pointed out that this was the first time any major decision had been made without joint consultation with them, and that they resented being deprived of the use of what they considered to be their own premises. Political action had resulted in some of the staff ignoring the school's central philosophy, which gave the conservative element in the local authority the opportunity to represent the current system as unmanageable; the school was forced to revert to the old, conventional, failed methods that it had so successfully discredited.

Controversy makes for more exciting reading than consensus, and the smooth-running and successful social and academic sides of the school have

been distressingly neglected. The question that has often been asked is "What went wrong at Countesthorpe?" The answer is only important if we can appreciate what was right about it.

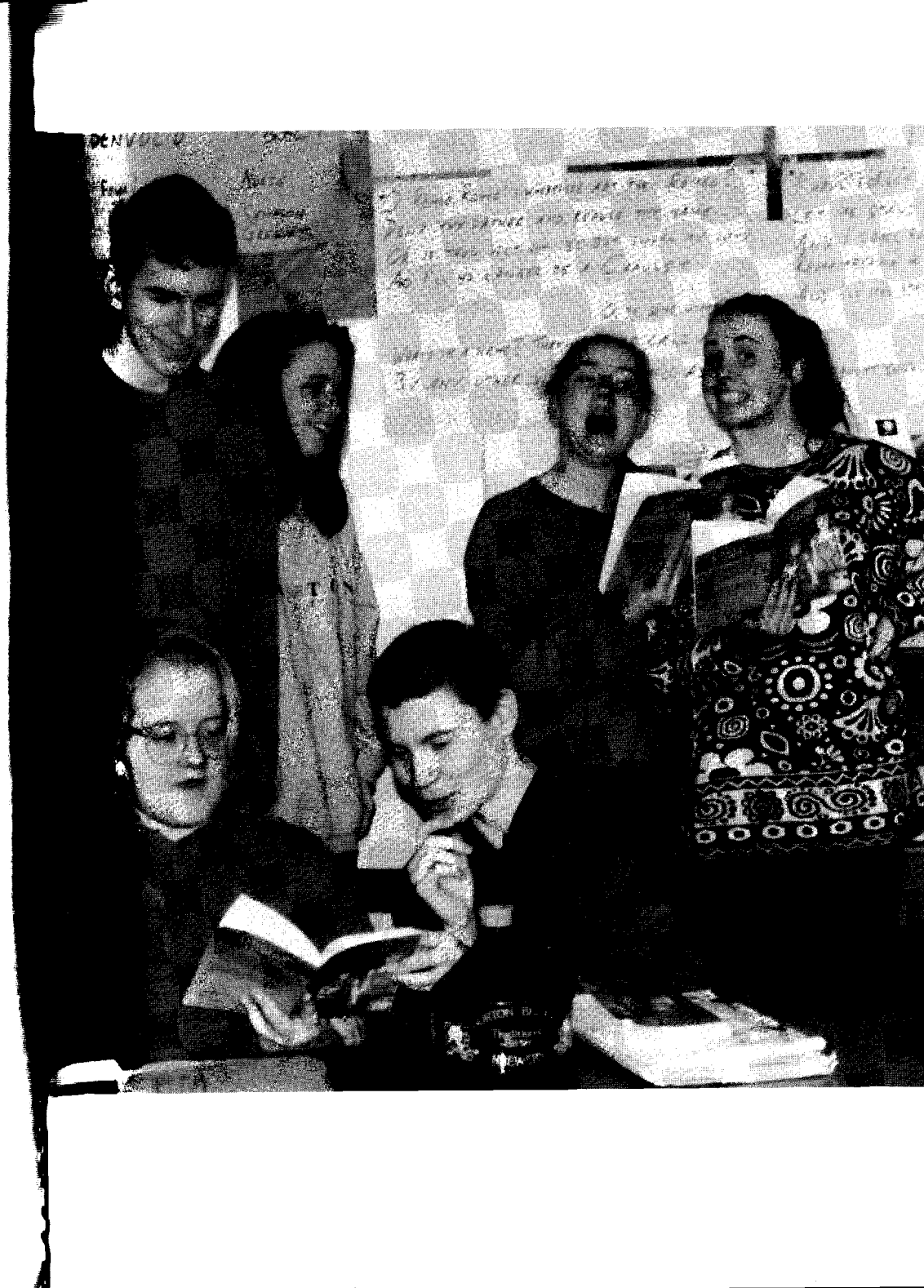
The school's educational innovations sprang from a staff conference in 1971, which adopted the proposals of a working party that had been set up to consider the curriculum. I quote a summary of its conclusions from Jenifer Smith's M. Phil thesis, *An exploration of teaching in action*.

Whatever individual views on the curriculum were, it seemed generally accepted that a fundamental, if not the aim underlying all aims at Countesthorpe was student autonomy; the curriculum was to create a situation where a student autonomy might thrive.

The 'core' system of options was felt to contradict student autonomy. Before the school opened teachers had felt it was right to impose on students a pattern of study which represented the teachers' view of education and that students would consider this reasonable as long as teachers were prepared to "respond imaginatively to their individual experience, interest and choice WITHIN each subject area." In practice, students rejected the teachers' judgement of what was worthwhile "either because it really was inappropriate to them personally or at least because as teachers we were failing to convince them of its appropriateness." The working party also felt that the curriculum offered an option system which did not represent a genuine choice. "The options are determined by us, the teachers, not by the students. To many students the choices we offer them seem narrow and unimaginative. Too often, when an option fails, a student has nothing left to do and we have all too little to suggest." There was a sense that whilst, on the one hand, teachers paid too little attention to students' interests and experience, they failed also to convey their own commitment to their subject, leading one teacher to describe the school as "somewhat soulless."

The working party felt that the curriculum had failed to resolve the "curious paradox of self-directed learning."

"The paradox is that for a student to direct his own learning successfully he needs to have made available to him a great abundance of activities, experiences and subject matters, and all presented to him with energy and enthusiasm ... And yet for a student to direct his own learning successfully he also needs close and sustained help and guidance from teachers who know him well - his interests, attitudes, values, abilities, quirks - and whom he knows equally well." This implied teachers committed to what they were teaching, specialists in the secondary school, and yet with a relationship with students which went beyond the boundaries of a particular subject. It led the working party to suggest that the chief weakness in the curriculum was the split between pastoral and academic care. They looked for a way of placing the pastoral system at the centre of school organisation "yet without destroying the excitements and opportunities of specialisation."



The strategy devised for putting these ideas into action involved dividing each year-group into three or four "teams" of about 180 students. Each team had a "team area" which was one large room with a number of smaller rooms adjoining it, and a group of teachers who each acted as personal tutor to an appropriate number of students from the team. Specialist subjects such as languages, music, heavy crafts, P.E. and drama were taught outside the team areas, but most students spent about half the week "in team", doing, in conventional terms, English, Social Studies, Art, Maths and basic Science. Every student in the school had an individual timetable for activities outside the team area, based on personal interest, and team-time was used as each student saw fit. For instance, you did not have English lessons during team-time, but you wrote as and when you wanted, and probably you discussed what you had written with your tutor or another teacher in the team.

This system had to fit in with the national examinations - O-Level and CSE as they were at that time - after the students, who had arrived at the age of fourteen, had had only two years experience of the school. The English and Social Studies qualifications were awarded on the basis of course work done by the students over these two years; this imposed limits on their autonomy - work in some form was demanded - but the range of subject, the range of treatment and the range of activity were virtually limitless. The teachers did not devise the curriculum, and nor did any class or group; a personal curriculum was devised by each individual student.

Barbara Smith was one of the first students to experience the team system. She wrote about it under the title *How I found my Education* in *The Countesthorpe Experience*, an anthology edited by John Watts:

As I can remember it, we all started off on the same piece of work. We had to write our autobiographies and also compile our family trees, if that was possible. This gave the tutors an opportunity for getting to know their students and their individual backgrounds, and acted as a starting point for work which was to follow.

After completing my autobiography, I couldn't really think of any work I could continue with. We started working through worksheets in social studies based on the family, to coincide with the work we had done ourselves on our own families. My tutor suggested that as I was particularly interested in music at the time, I might consider working on a project involving some kind of musical aspects. I took up this idea, feeling quite enthusiastic at the time, although only because I couldn't think of anything else to do.

In February 1973, the beginning of a phase of emotional disruption, disillusion, but all the same a lingering feeling of hope filled the air at Countesthorpe. A report had appeared on the front page of the local paper, condemning the College and all that it stood for, attacking the staff and the

principal, as well as the students. This initial article filled me with bitter anger. The words in front of me just wouldn't sink in because I knew they were not true. I wanted to turn my eyes away, to look again and find that they didn't exist. A friend and I wrote a letter to the same paper. It was published, followed by many others from students and parents complaining of the undue criticisms made towards us.

For months after this we suffered these sickening attacks. I was lucky in having parents who thoroughly supported the school, but what about others who were really attached to the school and went home the next minute only to hear their parents calling the school every name under the sun?

However, although I would like to emphasise the importance that this particular period of time eventually played upon my education in the team, I do not think it is necessary for me to concentrate upon the subject to any deeper extent. The team was proving to be the basis of a continuous dialogue between myself, my tutor, and the outside world. I became interested in researching into the history of Blaby, the village where I had lived for a number of years. I decided to base my project upon Blaby in the 1700s, and became deeply involved in this work through reading various books, looking over many old documents through visits to the Leicester archives and looking at the church registers of that period of time. Through this work I was re-creating a picture of the past myself, with my tutor's advice. I think it would be true to say that the experience and interest of probing into the past in this way was just as valuable to my tutor as it was to myself.

At the same time my interest in education had grown. By the time I entered the fifth year it had grown to such a considerable extent that it overtook my interest in the history of Blaby. I started to go to standing committee meetings and wanted to work around this interest in education. I experienced an incredible feeling of wanting to find out for myself, finding out through other people, along with the guidance that my tutor offered me. His guidance came over through a confidence in us both to converse freely, without the teacher ever playing the dominant role. If I lost my sense of direction and wasn't sure where to go next he would go through the alternatives with me. Through a zest in us both, and indeed from the tutor to the rest of the group, we found the key to learning and the answer to a personal knowledge. Learning became a dynamic experience through the spontaneity, observation and participatory values present in the team, and above all, through the conversation or continuous dialogue between teacher and student.

I read *Summerhill* by A. S. Neill, and after this my thoughts on education became even deeper. My ideas changed completely or maybe it was just that I had never thought of ideas such as Neill put together in his books. I wanted to strengthen my bond towards Countesthorpe and develop my own ideas towards life in general. I started a project based upon the Leicestershire plan [an educational scheme started in Leicester in 1957] but I lost interest in this idea, mainly due to general lack of information, or perhaps it was a lack of

the particular kind of information I wanted. I wanted to get beyond the outline of the plan to the deeper questions of education in Leicestershire but I found that people were not as co-operative as I hoped. I went to interview a man at County Hall but he wouldn't tell me very much. He kept asking me questions instead of letting me ask them. I then decided to widen the scope of this project to *A. S. Neill and Progressive Education*. I studied his background, the development of Neill's ideas and the development of Summerhill and its influence on other progressive schools. I enjoyed this work more than any I had previously done, and it has been the main influence on my ideas and interests since I started it, plus the fact that it has proved to be a very necessary part of my understanding, awareness and knowledge.

The team was a place where you could return to, where there was usually someone around to talk to. It was the root from which our personalities or characters developed. It was the generator for reconstructing our past, fitting it into the present and preparing us for the future. Maybe I became too attached to the team. I can think of a number of occasions when I just wanted to carry on working in the team area rather than go to specialist lessons although I had opted for them. My work may have suffered in some of those subjects studied outside the team but I wouldn't say that I regret concentrating on the subjects I studied in the team rather than on the others because it would have had a damaging effect on my learning patterns to have studied the things I was not interested in.

The end of 5M was very sad. Entry into the sixth form has been more disillusioning than any other part of my education.

I spent a few days at the school in 1980, when the team system was well-established. The social atmosphere was as informal and friendly as at Dartington. The students treated visitors and staff as equals; I felt like a human being, and not an observer from a remote planet. In all too many more conventional classrooms that I have visited I have created disturbance by my mere presence, in spite of behaving, as it seemed to me, perfectly naturally. At Countesthorpe I was taken for granted.

One of the questions I asked a number of students was how Countesthorpe compared to their previous schools. These are some of the answers:

"People come to school here because they like it - there's more to do at school than at home."

"You can sit with your friends."

"You don't have to wear a uniform."

"You can pick your own timetable."

"You don't have to do French."

"At my other school the lessons were too short."

"You were all taught together, so you could get left behind."

"At Countesthorpe you aren't made to work, but you get more done."

"First names make you feel more grown-up."

"There's more to do, like golf, tennis and archery."

"You don't have to do maths every day."

"At my last school people just mucked about, and took away your books, and called you names."

"It was so strict, you weren't allowed to wear nail-polish or ear-rings, you weren't allowed to swear, it had to be dead quiet or you got lines and detentions. At Countesthorpe you know you could get away with it, so you don't bother in the first place."

"At my last school they didn't understand you, they just forced as much work out of you as they could, and, if you didn't understand, it was too bad."

I was attending the school as if I was a student. I sat and worked in the team area on my own project, and talked to the other students and did my bit of science and maths when they took place so I didn't have a disproportionate amount of team time. Students had arranged the tables as they liked, so that they could sit together in groups of friends, or work alone for a while if necessary. There was a lot of quiet conversation. My project was interviewing other students about their work. I wandered from one table to another, avoiding interrupting people deeply involved in what they were doing. Everyone I spoke to was pleased with the work he or she had done, and was happy to talk to me about it. The standard of presentation, even among the less able, was high, and the quantity of work was astonishing. People had plainly been working at things that really interested them.

Here is a little of what I saw:

- A study of children's imagination, based on work in a crèche and an infant school.
- An account of work experience in the local library.

- A play, written and produced by the student and performed in local primary schools.
- Various series of photographs.
- Autobiographies.
- A family tree followed back to 1584.
- Reflections on old age, prompted by weekly visits to an old people's home.
- A comparison between the life of a photographic model and the life of the author's mother.

Projects on:

- Women's Rights
- Alcohol and alcoholism
- Markets (by the daughter of a stall-holder)
- The Great Central Railway (by the grand-daughter of a guard)
- Life at school
- Blacks in a white society

Some of these sound as if they could have been set to a whole class, but they were all personally undertaken by people who wanted to do them. Jenifer Smith, who was the leader of the team where I was working, said "I spend time preventing students from starting work; stopping them from plunging precipitately into the first thing that comes to mind. Are you sure? Read a little. Do you really want to do that? Caution."

A passage from her thesis about the work that students finally decided to do shows how much freedom they were given, how much time, how much activity they could choose that had no writing associated with it:

Pete Garratt spent hours writing and illustrating blood-curdling and racy narratives; his work on cricket and on motor cars was never very successful, but his nest collections, his photographs of crystals and his study of pond life caught his imagination so that he had energy for them and enjoyed the problems his work posed for him.

Jonathan seemed to attempt and put aside one unsuccessful idea after another; at the end of his first term I felt I had completely failed him and his childish behaviour was beginning to wear me down. Then he began to take an interest in photography, in pinhole photography and special effects. He was often to be seen pacing up and down, muttering about his latest scheme. He decided he would like to record parabolas on photographic paper. The work continued over weeks as he perfected a pendulum and sought ways to make a fine enough light. Having seemed restless and vacillating now he stuck tenaciously to the problems to be solved. He liked constant reference to an interested adult but did not usually require advice.

Debra would have a long chat once a week to organise work and mull over ideas. A piece of work she began on the National Front - "to try and understand what they are about so I can argue against them" - developed into work on intelligence, the origin of man and the language of prejudice. The original question was left in favour of other questions which it raised.

Russ and Colin were interested in not a lot it seemed. Their fascination, concentration and sustained observation on a pair of locusts and their subsequent brood was remarkable; similarly their commitment to their work in a special school and the children they worked with there.

Stephen Rowland, whose book *The Enquiring Classroom* describes fascinating work in a primary school, also had close associations with Countesthorpe. He distinguished between two patterns of classroom organisation. In the first of these the teacher decides what skills the children are to acquire, and chooses tasks that are intended to develop those skills. The children perform the tasks, willingly or unwillingly, and are assumed to have acquired the associated skills. The teacher then chooses fresh targets and sets new tasks. In the second, the child chooses an activity and follows it as long as interest continues to provide the motivation. It may lead on to other activities, it may provoke selection or it may be quietly dropped while the child looks for something more directly relevant. Any skills the child acquires are acquired incidentally. The teacher is present only as a colleague or research assistant; the child is leader of the learning.

Everyone sees the risks in the second approach. Perhaps the child may never learn to read and write and spell and add up; perhaps the child will never study a Shakespeare play or the English madrigal or the British Empire; opportunities may be missed. The disadvantages of the first approach are less readily recognised; perhaps the exercises set will not develop the skills they are supposed to develop; perhaps some children will not understand the purpose of the work set them; perhaps some children will be put off the subjects of study altogether, convinced either that the subjects are boring and incomprehensible or that they themselves are too stupid to appreciate them.

The overwhelming advantage of the second method is that it encourages children to take an interest in their own learning, to follow up their own concerns, to trust their own judgement, to look on the learning as a source of endless fascination rather than a sequence of unappealing tasks. This is something that had not been understood at Summerhill or Dartington, where the freedoms were primarily social, and freedom in learning was restricted to deciding whether to take a given set of lessons or not. Outside your team area at Countesthorpe you decided what courses to follow; within the team area you had this additional freedom of being able to decide what you would do on an entirely personal basis.

At Countesthorpe, different teachers had different ways of helping students to choose work that appealed to them. Jenifer Smith gave this account of the stimuli she liked to have available:

Some people leave their noticeboards empty. I preferred at the time to fill them with:

- a collection of pictures, writing, oddments around a vague theme.
- material about a range of subjects, suggesting that not only English, Maths and Humanities were important in that room but Craft and Sciences also.
- there might be charts, pamphlets, maps, cartoons, unusual pictures or ideas; anything I or, eventually, anyone in the classroom, found interesting, a sort of public commonplace book.
- students' work - if they agreed.

There were also:

- Books of all kinds - poetry, fiction, reference, handbooks, newspapers, magazines.
- A collection of articles, pamphlets and magazines based on subjects, mostly Parentcraft and Community Studies, that had been popular in the past and for which suitable resources were hard to find.
- Folders of ideas for writing that I made myself.
- Scrapbooks of pictures/articles that I found interesting or that I thought others would.
- Maps, old and new.
- Miscellaneous items: cogwheels, a maze, pottery, old bottles ...
- Plants growing, being propagated.
- Fabric and a sewing machine.
- A typewriter.
- Paintings, photographs, prints, sculpture.
- Art and craft materials; paints, chalks, inks, glues, card, junk.
- Drawing boards.
- Dyes and embroidery wool.
- Pinhole cameras, materials to make pinhole cameras.
- Access to cameras, film, a darkroom.
- Access to tape recorders.
- Fossils, stuffed mammals, a butterfly collection etc. from the museum.
- A bird table.
- A cage of locusts.
- Access to the science lab.
- A pond nearby and a stretch of wild land.
- Models - being made.
- People coming in to speak on one particular topic - formally and informally.
- Mothers with babies and small children.

- Somebody teaching how to spin.
- Costume dolls made by students.
- Films and videos - fiction and documentary.
- Slides.
- Television broadcasts for schools - and those produced for general viewing.
- Visits: museums, local shops, people, records office, London, Birmingham, different areas of Leicester, shops selling Asian food and clothing, farms, a windmill, hedgerows, along the canal, local villages, churches, pond dipping, cycle rides.
- Access to the school's library and resource centre.
- Access to a range of teachers in the team area and outside it.
- Work experience.
- Community visits: playgroups, hospital, old people's homes, the Mission for the deaf, the blind, disabled, infant and primary schools.
- Theatre, dance, mime, music - in school and out.
- Other students' work, especially as it was seen in progress.
- All the ideas students brought with them.
- Some of the ideas I brought with me.

In spite of the wealth of this list of possible stimuli, Jeni realised that much of what was on offer was utterly peripheral to her students' central needs and interests, and wrote this poem about the irrelevance of the classroom itself.

What do the straight walls of the classroom contain?

tables chairs

awkward adolescent bodies

awkward adolescent lives

who am I?

who are you

I am unhappy, I am in love.

I am ambitious. I am alone.

who are you?

who am I

In this turmoil.

Sit down. Write now. Be still.

How can they be still when what I ask is on the periphery of their lives?

I want to pass my exams. I have ambitions;

But still he cannot keep still.

The hand writes but the body squirms and twitches with other more pressing preoccupations.

love, holocaust, death, sex, friendship

he writes, words creep across the page,
now and then,

and his heart and mind rove along the hedgerows where he will seek out the wild birds and their nests.

Space, coolness, gathering dusk, animal sounds.

she writes, fast, pours the words onto the page.

flirtations, fumbings, confusion, half-truth.

she knows and does not know

romance, the swirl of her bright skirt, a stomach-lurching smile in his eyes.

comfort and uncertainty in the darkness.

Tonight, after I've got the tea, and put away the pots, I'll watch a bit on T.V.

Perhaps the phone will ring.

love, marriage, domesticity, a little excitement, a feathered nest

he writes here and there across the page

his grubby fingers hold the pen uncomfortably

grime beneath the bitten fingernails

it is painful to form the words to find the words

tonight he will reassemble the engine parts

conjure together the tiny awkward oily pieces

the paper holds the marks of his fingers,

the smudged words of his longing.

stupid thick as a plank dumbo

she writes, she answers the questions

numbers words her hand is on automatic.

Remember the news last night?

famine; abortion; politicians' talk; a picket line.

She writes; dutifully, neatly, pauses, gazes beyond the window, beyond the suburban houses,

to where there are riches and poverty, darkness and light, to where the need cries out

to the unknown into which she will step

to answer need

to answer the cries of her own heart

of her own needs.

Jeni was only one teacher in one team at Countesthorpe, so her attitudes cannot be assumed to be typical of the whole school, but it was Countesthorpe that enabled her to run her tutor group as she did, and at the time of my visit

as a "student" she was also the leader of her team. It is through her that I first heard of the school, and though I have twice spent time there, it is still largely through her eyes that I see it. She tells me that other teams approached the question of student autonomy in different ways; perhaps the heading of this chapter should be not *Countesthorpe*, but *Countesthorpe - Jenifer Smith's team*.

Conversation was an important activity in Jeni's team; she described it as the currency of the classroom. The normality of it, the unteacherliness of it, can be illustrated by a couple of short accounts:

Kate had written a very nice piece about catching mice on the haystack when she was a child. She began to talk about other things - how she kept worms in her pocket and how her father brought home orphaned pheasant chicks one day to rear. I asked her if she was glad she had spent her childhood on a farm and she said she was but she had taken it for granted at the time. I talked a bit about my Manchester childhood. She talked about the farms she had lived on and how they blurred into one. We compared notes on great uncles and Kate began to talk about sisters, half sisters, step-sisters, the complications of family life after a separation.

And on another day, with another girl called Katie:

The talk moved on to Katie's problems with working and Gary joined in. I said they had similar problems, and we talked about what I had said to Gary and how I had told him I would write to his mother. Oh yes! says Katie, threaten me more! Gary gave a cry of recognition. I laughed. The talk moved then to Katie's step-mother and Katie's reluctance to have her receive such a letter (and mine in fact). Katie talked at length about her step-mother and her present arguments with her. She decided, in the course of the conversation, that she mothered her brother which drew her to defend him. I said it wasn't surprising since she had been his mother for a few years. I talked about my own mother - about her mother's death [at about the same age as Katie was when her mother died] and how she had missed her more as she had grown older. Katie mentioned what she could remember of her mother, her hands, her voice when she shouted; Gary joined in also as we talked about acting in a way which we know annoys a person but we can't stop.

Such conversations go well beyond the school's original ambition to avoid the split between pastoral and academic care, to place the pastoral system at the centre of school organisation. Pastoral care involves dealing with cases of bullying, helping children to cope with difficulties at home, offering advice on future careers; it does not extend to conversations which are genuine exchanges, to the trading of personal memories and to an excited involvement

in talk about acting which neither student nor teacher is able to stop. There are many teachers who would regard such intimacy and openness as an abandonment of professional standards; they would feel it involved loss of status. Though their official descriptions may not articulate it, it is a fundamental belief in all the schools described in this book that any relationship between teachers and students is founded better on affection than on respect. Respect without affection is empty and often surreptitiously rebellious. Affection naturally entails a deep and impregnable respect, and the relationship is of course richest where the affection is mutual.

Conversations at Countesthorpe took place at all times of day. They did not spill over into lesson times, they were initiated in lesson times, and in any team you visited there would be dozens of conversations going on simultaneously in different parts of the room. Most of them did not involve teachers, yet there was not an atmosphere of noisy disorder. The floor was carpeted, and the acoustics played their part in separating conversations out, but the main reason for the sense of order was that the need for it was accepted. Most of the students were thoroughly engaged in what they were doing. If it became necessary for a teacher to play the role of policeman, it was with the general approval of the other students present.

The role of a teacher at Countesthorpe was quite unlike that of a teacher in a conventional school. Even the teachers' objectives were different. This is Jenifer Smith again:

I want students to have confidence in their own experience and knowledge and recognise its validity.

I want them to learn:

- that I will try to work out, with them, the best way to proceed so that they may pursue their own purposes and aims in the way most appropriate and effective for them;
- that I value each of them as individuals and expect them to respect the existence of others in the group;
- that my classroom is not a free-for-all so that noise levels and moving about take into account the well-being of others in the room.

I like to see students absorbed in their work; so interested in what they are doing that it comes up in conversation, in break times, after school, in the street ...

I like to see students tussling with a problem that they cannot let go until they feel they have resolved it for themselves, for the time being.

I do not want students to feel that I mysteriously know all the right answers; the proper way of doing things.

I would like them to feel:

- that they didn't have to take up my suggestions;
- that I often don't know things;

- that I do not know how they should set about doing something, but that I will work hard to help them to decide on the best way for them.

I want students:

- to find pleasure in their activities at school;
- to feel confident about drawing conclusions and forming opinions;
- to be able to reflect upon their experience;
- to be able to see each other as inspiration and as partners in their various pursuits.

This list does not include the wish to teach children to spell and it has no list of approved reading, yet the standard of presentation that I saw at the school was uniformly high, and even the less able students were writing fluently and prolifically. They read, too, books of their own choice, and used newspapers, pamphlets, magazines and other sources for their own research. In the public exams, over fifty percent of the students used to achieve standards that were only supposed to be accessible to the top third. Children want to learn whatever is necessary for them to follow up interests of their own, and complete tasks that they set themselves. Unless they are obliged to spend much of their time on work that seems to them irrelevant or meaningless, they are bound to find a need to develop their own literacy, and they will do all they can to develop it. And this is in addition to the much more important benefits they gain from a school like Countesthorpe: self-respect and self-confidence, purpose, responsibility, reflectiveness, awareness of the potential for delight. The anxiety that so many people feel when Stephen Rowland's second approach to teaching is proposed does not seem to be justified.

In chapters describing other schools, I have emphasised the child's reactions to the system. Here I quote from the conclusions of two students' projects - conclusions which reveal another effect of this kind of education that is emphasised again and again by students from Sudbury Valley, where the principle of autonomous study is taken even further. The first is by a girl who went every week to work in a local pre-school playgroup for children with severe mental and physical disabilities; and the second by a girl who worked in a local primary school.

I feel that my achievements during my visits to Menphys have been very rewarding. They have given me a thorough understanding of the love and affection needed so much by these children and I have in myself developed that source of control upon a mentally or physically handicapped child.

I openly admit that when the suggestion was made that I should work at Menphys I shuddered away the thought. Although it was an achievement I very much wanted to fulfil.

I have, like persons of my age, begun at the bottom for the children at Menphys are minutely abnormal and the upset of further abnormalities with older children or adults could change my views entirely.

I have during this time learnt so much from the children which I have noted in my diary events but I have also learnt things unknown about myself.

Seeing young children mental or physically handicapped as a child was not distressing. It was more of a fascination and I thought like blacks separated from whites they were just another race.

It wasn't until I began to work at Menphys that I started to understand what Mental and Physical Handicap really meant.

These handicaps are very depressing but in this depression I found a lot more. I found a deep secure love.

To me a mental and physical handicap means more than helplessness insecurity or DIFFERENT as is the word so often used to separate these children from normal human beings.

The main thing I have learnt to understand is the opposite of this word DIFFERENT. These children are to me inseparable from human beings known as normal. They may be physically different or even minutely mentally abnormal but they are still living human beings and this small difference should not be used to separate one community from another.

Altogether I found more love and affection from these children and I found no difficulty in fitting into their environment.

The main thing I have achieved is the total security of living in this world. This may seem strange and to put such a thing into words is very difficult but this explanation I will try to express. These children to me have proved to be in no way alone in the world. The ease of control upon them was apparent from the beginning to the end of the term I spent with them.

The world too is in their situation. It is proposed to be an uncontrollable, insecure place but it is fighting its way to freedom and survival and this situation was where I saw the reflection of these children. All the time they are fighting to survive and with our help could prove this. I have found the help I can give them and that is love, trust, strength and security. I have faced them and have found no difference. This is how everyone should see these children.

For this achievement I thank everyone at Menphys both for the joy I have had and for the educational facts.

Visiting Thistley Meadow Primary School has been a very interesting and enlightening experience for me, and I feel that I have learnt a lot over the past four months ... I have had a small glimpse 'behind the scenes' of the running of the school, and I have, in fact, been part of it. Now I can finally appreciate, if only in a small way, the thinking that lies behind even the shortest of lessons.

During my time at Thomas Estley, my High School [attended before Countesthorpe], I visited my old Junior School and worked there for several

weeks, but didn't achieve nearly as much as I did at Thistley Meadow. I think the fact that I was allowed to have a class of my own, and work with them as a teacher gave me an insight that couldn't have been obtained any other way.

It boosted my confidence a great deal to find that I could hold a group's attention for any length of time - and they were actually interested in what I was saying! I also got a lot of satisfaction from reading their work, and thinking that my precious planning and ideas had been their inspiration.

At the beginning I truthfully thought that my English lessons with the group would turn out to be a complete shambles. I pictured the seven of them sitting there, talking amongst themselves, not taking notice of me and I even tried to think of ways that I could persuade them to work!

Of course, I learnt that I was quite capable of capturing their attention and their interest, and to my delight I discovered that they actually enjoyed doing the work I set for them. I think that if I hadn't got a good response from them it would still have been a worthwhile experience, but I wouldn't have enjoyed it half so much, and I don't think that I would have been able to write about it in an enthusiastic way.

Their written work and responses on the whole pleased me, but surprised me too. I didn't really imagine before that someone with the lowest academic abilities in the group would produce the sort of writing that pleased me most - but that was how it turned out, the 'someone' being Sarah [not her real name].

I am only just beginning to learn how to explain what is possibly going on in their imaginations when they are writing, and what experiences might lie behind the things they write. I have tried to analyse Sarah's writing in this way, and would like to do a lot more of it.

When I was working with the children I felt as though I had aged 10 years some of the time! One of the members of the class asked me how old I was and when I told him 16 he replied "Oh god!"

In my own mind I know that I have learned a great deal and benefited enormously from my experiences at Thistley Meadow, but it's very difficult for me to put all my thoughts down on paper and to express just what I feel.

All I can say is that I more than enjoyed my visits, and hope that I will have the opportunity to do something of the same kind again one day.

Here are Jenifer Smith's comments.

I have seen quite a lot written about the worth of 'community involvement' for secondary school children. Very often it is an option for the 'less able' or an option timetabled alongside PE. I have read strong justifications for community involvement programmes and have felt not only did they 'protest too much' but they also fell short somehow of what might be possible.

It was possible at Countesthorpe for work in the community to be an essential strand in a student's intellectual and emotional growth.

Rachael's work at Menphys wasn't peripheral but central to her development - academic, social, personal. It allowed her to take herself seriously, and be accepted seriously by adult workers, as a proper contributor to necessary work. It became a part of her view of herself as emerging into adulthood.

In going out to learn about something outside herself she learnt about herself. Whenever I asked students who were working in the community what they thought they had learnt, their first response was "about myself." That self-knowledge is a valid and necessary part of intellectual growth.

... Children are not merely practising, waiting for the day when they will be, magically, grown up. They are serious practitioners, in the same way that adults may be.

The two children that I have quoted did real things. They did not merely read up about disability or teaching, they actually worked with disabled children and taught a small group for a term. Most of the work that children chose to do in team time was real. The topics listed previously in this chapter were chosen to show variety, not to demonstrate how relevant each topic was to the student who worked on it, but in fact nearly all of them are related either to personal experience or to the experience of others in the family.

The difference this authenticity makes is enormous. At one time a boy I was tutoring because he was excluded from school chose to work on a history of the local village, and went to look at the church register to see how the occupations of the villagers had changed over the years. The exercise could easily have been set in a text-book, with facsimile pages of a real or even a fictitious register and students could have been set the task of counting the number of agricultural labourers at different periods, or estimating how many of the people who lived in the village also worked there. The exercise could have been completed in a few minutes, whereas making an appointment with the vicar, going to the church and searching through numbers of different volumes took hours. But the exercise would have been utterly boring, and doing exactly the same tasks with a real parish register proved fascinating.

Yet authenticity is only a small part of the value of the experiences enjoyed by Countesthorpe students; what was even more important was personal involvement. Researching old age in psychology text-books is one thing; reading autobiographies of old people is another; but working in an old people's home is immensely more significant; and discussing the past with your own grandparents can be even more important.

So what would I have done myself if I had been lucky enough to be the right age to go to Countesthorpe at its best? Maths and science, drama and story-writing, literature and music. Whether I would have studied languages or not I can't decide; I think I probably would have done if I had had time. And for humanities? A study of board games and card games; famous battles;

theology, morals and eastern religions; folk tales; map-making. And if I went out of school I would have wanted to work with young children and old people. And I would have wanted to try journalism. And advertising. And the only things from this list that I actually did successfully at Eton were mathematics and languages; the science course I followed was so limited as to be of very little use; drama and story-writing happened on my own initiative out of school; literature consisted of three exams, in my whole school career - one on *Oliver Twist*, one on Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* and one on *Twelfth Night*. For years I hated all of them. The piano lessons that I had crippled my musical talent for ever, though I limp on. The humanities subjects I would have liked to have studied never cropped up at all, unless you count school chapel as theology. By comparison with Countesthorpe, my actual education was generally irrelevant, or else inadequate where it was not counterproductive. Only maths and languages score highly, and they might have scored highly at Countesthorpe as well.

How would you have used the school? How does it compare with the school you actually attended?

How is it that any local education authority could possibly want such a school to revert to conventionality? It is difficult to see any reason other than fear of the unfamiliar. It seems that those in authority in the world of education would rather stick to old methods that have been shown to fail than embrace new methods that have been shown to succeed. The failure is familiar, and familiarity is a stronger recommendation than success.

Would you not have been inspired by a teacher who set herself such tasks as these?

I must allow space for discovery;
time to feel comfortable with a subject

I must try to offer challenges
offer the kind of discomfort which gives rise to questions and change
provide information, tools to work with
teach skills that are relevant when the need arises
open up avenues and possibilities

What I must guard against is enforcing my viewpoint
imposing my framework
seeing from my eyes only.



7 Neel Bagh and Sumavanam

This chapter describes two schools - Neel Bagh, which closed in 1987, and Sumavanam, a school based on similar but distinct principles, which I visited in 1996. Both schools are in rural areas in southern India, a few hours by bus from Bangalore. Both schools have helped people to escape from poverty.

I first met Usha and Narasimhan, the couple who are the sole staff at Sumavanam, when they were spending five weeks in England visiting schools and meeting old friends. They had left their school still running, without adult supervision. They knew that the older children could work on their own and would help the younger ones, and that for a few weeks their presence would not be needed. This, I thought, must be a very remarkable school indeed.

Before Sumavanam started, Usha worked for many years at Neel Bagh, which was founded in 1972 by David Horsburgh, a Scotsman. When he died in 1984, his family kept the school going until 1987, but then it had to be sold, and its character changed. The Neel Bagh Trust, however, still supports two other schools which had grown up to develop the original ideas - Vikasana, also close to Bangalore, founded in 1978, and Sumavanam, founded in 1982.

David Horsburgh wrote a fine description of his school in 1984, shortly before he died, and I can do no better than quote some passages from it:

Neel Bagh is a non-fee-paying school and caters to that section of the public normally called disprivileged. It is set in the heart of rural India, surrounded by hills and trees. It is not a residential school, although some of the students are the children of people who live at Neel Bagh; other children are drawn from four surrounding villages.

At present there are twenty-seven children in the school, ranging in age from 3 to 21. They are all from non-affluent families. Although one or two of the parents can read Telugu [the local language], the children do not come from an educated background and there are no books or other printed matter available in their homes.

Children are quite free to come, or not to come, to any class. Children are encouraged to cooperate with each other and they are not encouraged to compete. Competition is usually an important motivation factor in most school systems, but in Neel Bagh it is largely eliminated because every child is, in most subjects, at a different level from every other child.

The child's academic progress is not equated with morality; in other words, the child is not considered good if he gets a sum right and bad if he gets one wrong.

No punishments are given, either as a retaliation for some supposed offense, or as a deterrent to some future one; nor is there a school council to award punishments which the teacher does not like to give himself.

Perhaps the natural motivation which the children of Neel Bagh seem to possess in full measure stems from:

- a loving relationship between teachers and children;
- interesting and enjoyable materials;
- materials which are geared to the attainments and abilities of each individual child and not to a mythical class average, and which, therefore, the child in most cases is able to use successfully;
- constant and cheerful encouragement;
- freedom for the child to choose the kind of work he would like to do at any particular moment, although in effect this is modified by the timetable. It means, in practice, that while the child is encouraged to do English in the English period (unless he wants to play under the trees) he is free in that period to choose any English activity that he wishes;
- frequent new intellectual experiences;
- every child is normally a teacher or helper of other children;
- every activity is meant to be, and is, enjoyable both for the children and for the staff.

There is a regular timetable, but it must be admitted that this is primarily for the convenience of teachers and is not meant to be adhered to rigidly. It would seem, however, that children are quite happy to accept a certain amount of structuring in their day, especially when such a structure can easily be given up if an activity (a picnic or an outing or the planting of groundnuts, etc.) makes it desirable.

David Horsburgh gives the Neel Bagh timetable in some detail. Children could open the school as early as they liked, but at 8.45 there was a quarter of an hour of tidying and preparation before the bell rang at nine o'clock, and the day began with "a certain air of formality." Teaching might be in English or in Telugu, and the curriculum also included Hindi, Kannada (another local language) and Sanskrit. Subjects other than languages that are mentioned are singing, music (both listening and performing), play-reading, listening to stories, philosophy, science, environmental studies, handicrafts (including pottery and carpentry), mathematics and Scottish dancing. There was no school meeting, but once a week there was a discussion, at different times for the older and younger students. This was known as "question hour" and children could ask whatever they wanted. There was much discussion of ethical, moral and social problems. After school the children might work on a building, if one was under construction, or cultivate the vegetable garden. The children went home at five, but from six to eight they could return if they wished.

The seniors and juniors return to the school to work at what is called homework. The whole period of two hours is unsupervised. The children are free to come or not as they please. No homework is set, but any work which the children do is corrected in the normal class periods. Children are free to work at any subject for any length of time or to talk, help each other, play games, paint or read. This period of unsupervised work has not only been useful to the children in giving them time for work which would otherwise have to be done in a class period, but has also given them an opportunity to learn how to work on their own without a teacher's supervision.

And there are other comments that I cannot resist quoting for their provocative clarity. Some differentiate Neel Bagh from almost all of the other schools in this book, but most give concise expression to ideas that all would share.

No dogmas or opinions are presented to the children; no religious or political ideology is presented to them; the object of the school is not to produce a model child cast in any particular mould. It goes without saying, however, that as soon as there is a good relationship between teachers and children, it is impossible to avoid conditioning, at least by negation.

A great deal of time is spent by the children on what might be called practical activities, as opposed to academic ones. This does not mean that we are thinking in terms of vocational education or any such thing; we are not training plumbers or carpenters, but educating human beings. In spite of all that has been said about learning-transfer, it seems to us here that if the child can learn to acquire skills or to solve problems, then this ability is transferable. Practical activities are one of the best ways of learning how to acquire skills, primarily because the child finds them so enjoyable.

Singing occupies a lot of space in the timetable because we have found that children, in learning to sing, are also learning to listen, and this has proved of immense benefit in learning other subjects.

Children learn as well from their peers, often perhaps better, than from other adults. ... More learning can go on in this way than under the usual method of herd teaching.

Building seems an excellent activity - it requires co-operation and team spirit without arousing the competitive urges so necessary for winning games in schools.

David Horsburgh hoped that the children who left Neel Bagh would become true revolutionaries, and would "neither want, nor be able to fit into society as it is without trying to change it." He went on:

At a more prosaic level there is no doubt that, after 12 years, academic attainments are substantial. Not only are children able to pass the Government examinations at the SSC, Intermediate and B.A. levels (in many cases much better than children and students from nearby schools and colleges) but in addition they are learning three extra languages, carpentry, pottery, embroidery, art, drama, music, philosophy and gardening, in addition to the eleven subjects which they have to take in the public examinations; our B.A. students, whether taking their 1st, 2nd or 3rd year examinations, are only spending about 50% of their school time on subjects which are going to be examined in the B.A., while the rest of their time is spent on educational activities which are not going to be examined at all.

I had the good fortune to meet Vijayalakshmi, a former student of Neel Bagh, when I visited Mirambika, the school described in chapter ten. She agreed to an interview. She told me that she originally came to Neel Bagh because her brother was working there as a mechanic when her parents died. She became part of the community, one of the many who referred to David Horsburgh as "Appa" (father).

Me: Have you any memories of particularly good times you had at Neel Bagh?

Vijayalakshmi: I think I really had a wonderful time throughout. The country-side, the people there, the knowledge I got from there, the atmosphere, everything - it was totally beautiful. Everything went off well. At that moment I didn't even question is it good or is it bad or anything like that. It is naturally growing there, in a sense.

Me: Were you allowed to play as much as you wanted, or did you have to go to some lessons?

Vijayalakshmi: Well, we were given time to play, and then - like I remember my maths class. I was totally against maths, I don't know why, because I used to get head-aches, whenever I hear about maths, "Oh, tomorrow's maths," then I used to start preparing myself. "Tomorrow what shall I do during maths?" And then I used to tell my maths teacher that I am having a head-ache today, can I read a book? That's what I used to do mostly and I was given that time to read books. I used to take a book and sit under the trees and read books, and that's it.

Me: And have you learnt maths since, or not?

Vijayalakshmi: I did well - in maths I was not so good - but I did well. I was not really good at maths, actually, but I enjoyed doing it - geometry a lot.

Me: How long did you stay?

Vijayalakshmi: Ten years.

Me: What was the teaching like?

Vijayalakshmi: Well, it was a very playful method, I think, because it was not the teacher comes and you have to open your books, and you do this,

nothing like that. OK, this time we have Telugu class or English class or whatever, and whoever's ready, they come and do it. They have their own books, they have their own timing, so we used to come. Whenever we needed help, of course, we used to go and ask the teachers. And I was not really good at maths, and Telugu was my second language. Well, third language, you can say, because my mother-tongue was Tamil, and English was what we were taught there, and then Telugu. Picking it up was difficult, especially the script. So these two I had to really work on, so I had to consult each time. The teacher used to prepare quite a lot of work-cards, flash-cards and all that, you know. It was fun learning, actually. We never felt "No. Today we have to go to school," nothing like that. And I think most of time I spent in my school only, because during holidays my brother was there, we were living there, so we were not going anywhere in the summer holidays. So the key was there, in Appa's house. We used to go and get it and sit in the school, read books - that's how I used to spend my time.

Me: How important a part of the school were the lessons?

Vijayalakshmi: Actually, frankly speaking, the school was like a home. Appa used to teach us under the trees, you know. And we used to make our own food and all that. So I think all that was part of the lesson. It was very very natural, I think, because every day if you are wide awake then it's going to school. School, like my house was here and the school there, so any time I can run across and come back, like that. In between I used to go home and have a snack and come back, that also. Nobody questioned me, "Where were you?", or anything. But we were all punctual at school. Something - I don't know what - made us do that. At a certain time, if we had a certain lesson, we were there. And obviously we never questioned because the teachers were so affectionate, I think more than our real natural parents, really. So there was no fear or anything like that, that you have to work for it, nothing. And we used to enjoy whatever we used to do.

Me: How much did the school depend on David Horsburgh himself?

Vijayalakshmi: Well, I think he was the real actual force to the school. Even the teachers used to call him Appa. That respect was always there. And he was so affectionate with everyone, even the plants there, the path he was walking. He was carrying that love, so each one felt for him, even the workers, the teachers, the children, and he never treated anybody that he is a worker so he should be treated in a different way. Nothing like that. Everybody loved him as we were all a part of the family and he was the central force of the family. And even outsiders, whenever they used to come, there was a special feeling, actually. He just gave that vibration.

Me: Did most of the children who finished their time at Neel Bagh move out of the villages?

Vijayalakshmi: Well, yes. Because I think two of them went abroad and they are doing very well still now, and two became teachers. Right now one is a lecturer and the other is a teacher, and one became an air-hostess in the airlines, and another became a lawyer - these are all the senior students - the

other became a doctor. Many of them are really doing well, and another boy, he is working with Action Aid. Now I think he is come into a good position. And another person was a principal of a school and later on he joined into politics, and then he is back into teaching now, so almost all the seniors have well settled that way. And one became a carpenter. The rest of the others became farmers and things. Everybody's tasting life in different ways now.

Me: What did you enjoy most at Neel Bagh?

Vijayalakshmi: So much, really. The space, the place, the picnics, the swimming, the carpentry, everything really, because - I remember on Wednesdays we used to have science experiments and all that, and during summer it was very hot there, and we used to ask the science teacher "Akka [sister], please go and ask Appa that we want to go for a swim," and she would go and ask Appa, and he would say "OK, let them go for a swim." That way we used to walk out any time, you know. Swimming was something, and again picnics. We used to ask him "Can we have a picnic this month?", night picnics, really moonlight, wonderful. Once we even took, what was it, I think a goat, we took a goat and we stuffed ookma into it - ookma is an Indian dish, actually - stuffed into it, and we took it and in the evening we stayed in a forest, and Appa got this - do you know that Red Indian style, you bake it on the fire, with these twigs, you hang the goat in the centre, and you light a fire. And he did it for two hours, I think. The whole roasting went on and on and we played many games over there and finally we had a dinner there and it was very Western style. We roasted potatoes.

And also he used to take us to Bangalore to see a lot of plays, and also even our senior children, they used to act. Appa used to train them. Like Julius Caesar, Macbeth, all those, children used to do it. And we used to put them up in the BLT, that is Bangalore Little Theatre. And we used to have poetry sessions, which I used to love, that time, really. Because he used to have a library, his own study room, and all the shelves were full with different kinds of books, beautiful books. I think I have not even seen anywhere else here in Delhi with that kind of library after that. And he used to arrange everything very well; he used to have a central mat, a small lantern there, and all of us helping. We used to come with a poem prepared and then we would share it. Just simply listening to each other. Something beautiful, really. Later on, with the candle light. And on Saturdays we used to have question classes, where we can ask him any kind of questions; it can be philosophy, it can be any problem which we went through in the school. We used to ask him "Do you believe in God?" That sort of question.

Me: And what did he say, when you asked him "Do you believe in God?"

Vijayalakshmi: Well, he never answered that question because he said "I don't know if God is there or not," but once in a while, one of the people, a parent, she said "Appa is it going to rain today?" and he would point upwards, like this - "Only God knows." That way, you know. He had a wonderful smile, really.

Me: Did you have problems with other children?

Vijayalakshmi: Well, I'll tell you one incident which I went through, which I still remember. One of the senior students, he was good at gardening. He was stronger and extremely good at it. Whatever he grows they all grow tall. So we used to be a little jealous. "How can he? We also used the same kind of compost, seeds and everything, his grows taller." So what happened, he had grown some spinach, so on one Sunday me and friend went and we pinched off all the spinach, and right that moment he was coming, you know, we didn't see that, and he saw us doing it, and then he didn't say anything. We felt very bad. Next day somebody asked him "What happened to your garden?" and things like that, and he said "This is what happened." Then Appa came to know about it, then he called us and we were so scared, because he generally doesn't scold us, and I was feeling guilty already. So Appa called us, and he said "Did you do something wrong?" and I said yes. "Do you think it is good?" I said no. "Is he your enemy or something?" I said no. "Then why did you do it?" "I think because he grows very good plants, and whatever we do it was not coming, so I felt a little jealous, sort of thing," and he said "Go and say sorry to him, and when you felt sorry, then you should express it." That's it, he never scolded. Never. Even though he was very particular about things, like books and all that. I learnt how to open a book from him. It was not like this, turning off pages, but page by page at the corner. That was something he taught us. He did not say that you have to open like this. The way he was opening we used to watch it, I don't know, to grasp it. One time my last page was there, and I will have to start a new lesson, so I thought "Why shouldn't I take a new copy, and I can start a new lesson in a new copy?" So I tore off that page, the last one. Two mistakes, I think I have done wrong. And he asked me "What happened to this page?" And I said "I tore it." And he said "No, never do that. Because everything has its own value." That's it. He never scolded, but that was enough.

Most of these children who discussed philosophy, read poetry to each other, acted Shakespeare in the town theatre and went on to become, among other things, doctors and teachers, had parents who could not read.

Usha taught English at Neel Bagh, and Narasimhan taught at the nearby Rishi Valley Rural Centre. (This centre was a school for village children in the same grounds as the prestigious and expensive Rishi Valley School, but was kept carefully separate.) Narasimhan became interested in the methods used at Neel Bagh, and two years before David Horsburgh's death the Neel Bagh Trust enabled them to put their own ideas into practice at Sumavanam.

Sumavanam too is in a beautiful area. It is on the lower slopes of one of many steep hills which look like piles of granite boulders with a little sandy soil scattered over them so some scrub can grow. Between these hills a river runs, spreading a narrow plain of paddy-fields, and a bumpy road carries battered, loud-horned buses and lorries which seem to drive all through the night.

Usha and Narasimhan live in a single-storey house at the top of the garden. Scattered below them are half a dozen single-story buildings, including three classrooms and rooms for visitors. They have mud walls and tiled roofs supported on battens resting on undressed poles. The floors are concrete, smoothed and polished by many bare feet. There is electricity in all the buildings, but only the house itself and one other building have running water and glazed windows.

The children come from four nearby villages, and most are the poorest of the poor. (The children of the electrician and the plumber also come to the school, in exchange for services.) Six or seven of the oldest children sleep in the classrooms on straw mats on the concrete floors, only going home to have breakfast and supper, and to help with household chores.

Usha and Narasimhan are the only staff at Sumavanam, though they have a lot of help from the older students. Usha is much respected in the locality for her medical advice and makes herself available to dispense basic remedies between five and six every day. All the children learn individually at their own pace, but otherwise the teaching is mostly conventional. Children learn spelling and tables, and Usha believes it is helpful to drill certain techniques. Progressing steadily through a consecutive course book, ticking off the pages as they go, gives children who are not used to literacy a great sense of achievement.

Children at Sumavanam are free to come, or not to come, to any class, but every child wants to come. It is an insult to be told "Go out and play because you seem distracted." Even though no homework is set, the children even want to come back in the evenings and carry on with what they have been doing during the day. One of the older boys sits with the younger ones to help them and to maintain an atmosphere of industry, but he is only there because they asked for the arrangement to be made. To be deprived of their homework time is regarded as a punishment. There are theoretically school holidays three times a year, to coincide with periods of maximum activity on the land, such as sowing and harvest, but when I visited the school there had been no holiday taken for seventeen weeks.

Narasimhan is scrupulously honest. When I suggested that at Sumavanam there were no punishments, he would not agree. To exclude a child from any activity cannot be described as merely a consequence; it seems to Narasimhan to be a punishment, as does an expression of adult disapproval. Nevertheless, he would be extremely reluctant to send a child home, as this would almost certainly result in a parental beating.

He is scornful of intellectuals, who he sees as people who sit and talk a great deal, but never actually do anything worth while. The children meet many visitors to the school, but as far as possible these are activists or practical people who actually get things done.

Every day at Sumavanam starts with an hour of agricultural or domestic work in the school buildings and the grounds, which cannot be properly maintained without such help from the children. Participating in the running of the school by cleaning the classrooms, taking care of the trees and looking after the cow also helps them to understand that the school is really theirs, and since the responsibilities they are given are real, they take them seriously. The mangoes they grow are shared out amongst them; when farm produce is sold, the money is used for excursions.

There is emphasis on an ecological approach: no weed-killers or pesticides are used; snakes are not killed but caught and released in some remote place; methane is made from cow-dung and used for cooking. One of the morning jobs is collecting the cow's dung, mixing it with water by hand, and pouring it into the methane tank.

There is also stress on social equality. Narasimhan is a Brahmin, and his family were shocked when he chose to marry Usha, who is not of such a high caste. There are Harijan (untouchable) children at Sumavanam, and other parents have to accept the fact that everyone drinks from the same container. (This is a strong statement, even though all Indians drink by pouring the water into their mouths without allowing their lips to touch the cup. In many villages Harijans have to draw their water from separate and inferior wells.) Boys learn to sew as well as girls.

The three things that I have thought about most since my visit are the attitudes of the children, what I learnt of their backgrounds, and the commitment and honesty of Usha and Narasimhan.

The timetable is conventional. Arithmetic is taught from books of sums and English mainly from books of exercises, but there is no feeling that the work is dull. Everyone works individually, which means that everyone can succeed; no one is given work that is either too hard or too easy. When it is time for reading in English, you choose your own book, prepare a page and then read it aloud either to a teacher or to someone else in the class. Mutual help has taken the place of competition. The atmosphere in the classrooms is one of eager industry.

Not all the work is academic. I saw acting and folk-dancing and some excellent and varied art work, much of it done with materials that cost nothing, such as leaves, sawdust and feathers. Creative writing is done in Telugu.

At break-times the children play with radiant enthusiasm, but with none of the shrieking over-excitement of children who have been forced to sit still for far too long. Even though most of their parents are illiterate, they seem to find it natural that they should sit quietly and study, and they are pleased with their achievements. When I visited the school, there were two English students there helping out for a few months in between school and university,

Laura Williams and Jess Ross; they thought that the children's ready cooperation might be due to the fact that there was no tradition of bad behaviour in school - the sort of tradition that many western or westernised children pick up from comics and school stories, and indeed from their own parents and older brothers and sisters.

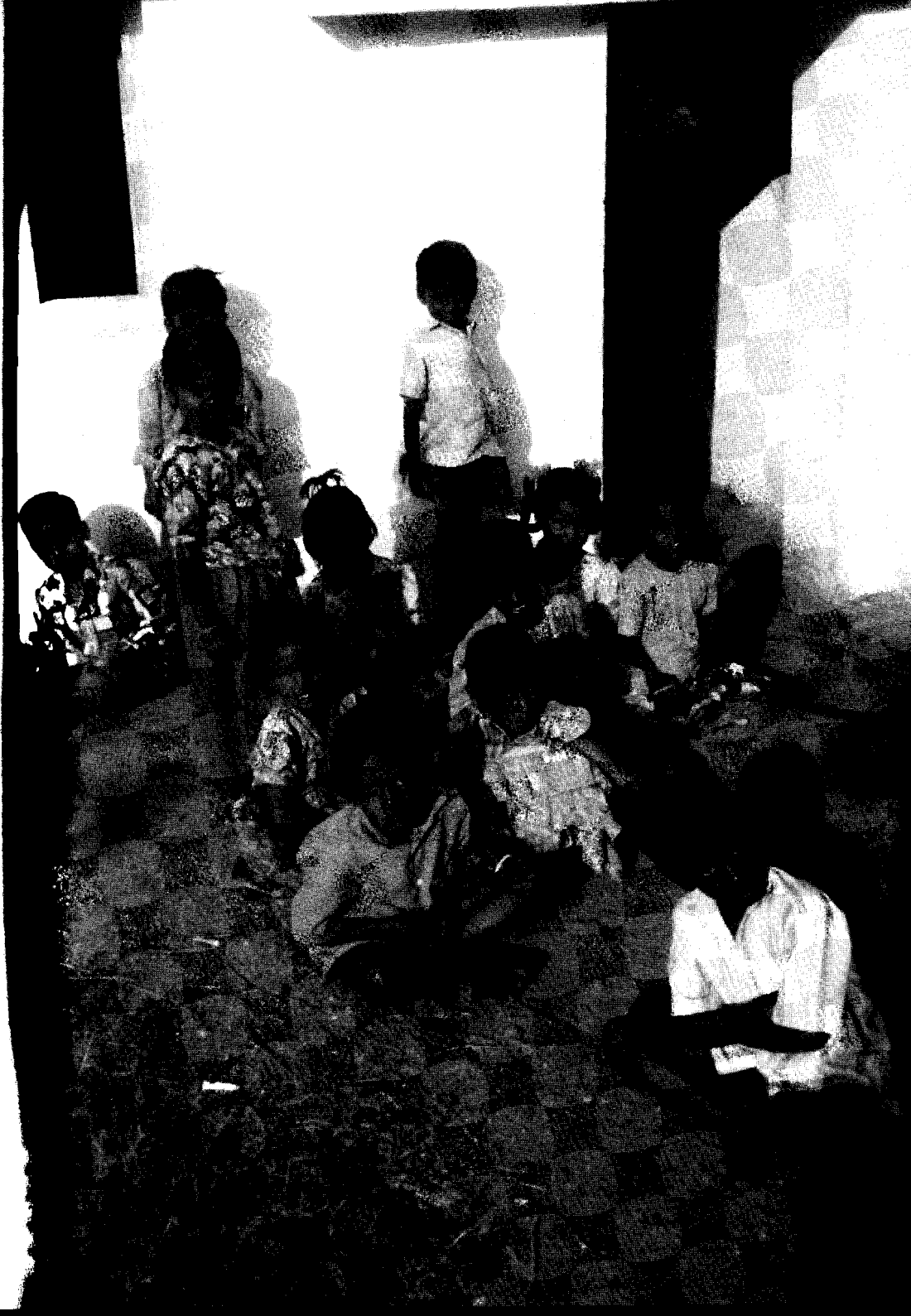
Of course I had seen films about India and I knew that there was poverty and disease. But this was not like seeing poverty in a documentary, or indeed walking past it on the way to your hotel. Most of the children were beaten at home, some of them every day. Many of the fathers were drunkards, and one of the older boys who normally slept at the school used to stay at home when his father was drunk in order to protect his mother. Almost all the children were undernourished, and it was not unheard of for a child to faint from hunger. One mother had recently died after her clothes had been soaked in kerosene and set alight; it was suspected that this was not an accident.

Shortly before my visit, a fourteen-year-old girl had been taken away from the school by her parents so that they could marry her to a young man who was unable to read or write. She was expected to start a family immediately, and the bridegroom fiercely resented her education.

Girls in the area are often married as young as twelve. Hardly any girl would question her mother's advice, and none at all would dare to oppose her father's wishes. Children have also been removed from the school so that they could look after the family goats, or care for younger brothers and sisters.

Usha took Jess and Laura and me to visit a family who lived by the main road near the school. Six of them lived in a small rectangular hut with no windows, no furniture and a mud floor damp from recent rain. When we went it was dark, and the only light was from the fire and a single candle. On the floor behind the door, hidden in the shadows looking like a pile of bones, was an old man, the grandfather of the family. The smoke went up through the thatch. After a short visit Usha wanted to take us to the house of a poorer family. I felt as though I was prying into other people's misfortunes, so we did not go. I think now that my reaction probably looked like distaste rather than shame, and that I was making a tactless mistake.

Narasimhan took me to visit the village school, where there were one hundred and fifty children and two teachers. The children were divided into seven groups, established in the one small classroom, on two verandahs and in corners of the tiny playground. The teachers, two well-dressed and polite women, had long canes. On the board in the classroom there were complicated equations, worked out for the top class to copy onto their slates. Narasimhan said that many of them would not be able to add up, but that this was what was on the curriculum for children of this age. The teachers told us that the younger children were impossible to teach because they did not want



to learn. This was extraordinary, given the enthusiasm of the children from the same background who were lucky enough to go to Sumavanam.

There is polio in the village, and when we were waiting for the bus to take me to Bangalore on my last day we saw three people on crutches, a deaf mute beggar and the father of one of the Sumavanam children, drunk and staggering, at four o'clock in the afternoon. Narasimhan commented that he did not know how children could emerge from such dreadful backgrounds and be such good people. He believes they survive conditions that would make middle-class children break down.

Narasimhan gave up a highly paid career in military avionics to come and teach poor children. His original ambition was to change the whole village by educating his students, but he now sees that as an unrealistic aim. He now hopes only to transform the lives of the students themselves. When they pass their exams their first ambition is to leave the village.

Usha is at first less conspicuous in the school than Narasimhan, but her influence is at least as great. She is highly valued by the children as a teacher and one evidence of her power outside the school is that she is the one who has sometimes shamed a drunken father into giving up drinking. She has given her life to Sumavanam in spite of suffering from asthma there.

One of the lessons Narasimhan and Usha wish the children to learn is that they should not lie. A child who has done something wrong will be forgiven immediately if she tells the truth, but will be sent home if she has lied. Narasimhan's concern for truth goes much further than this. When he and Usha visited Sands (the school I helped to start which is described in chapter fourteen) they found it wild and unruly, but he still asked me to tell him whether I thought that at Sumavanam they were too strict, and whether the children were frightened of him and Usha. He is not so sure of his methods (or so unsure of them) that he cannot accept criticism; in fact he actually goes out of his way to invite it.

When you see the children required to sit up straight, or reproved for yawning, when you hear them calling Narasimhan "Sir", you might well imagine that I would think the school too strict. Yet they call Usha "Akka," which means "elder sister," and they come to classes because they want to, so the atmosphere must be right for them. It may partly be the contrast between the clarity of school and the disorder at home, but whatever it is, it seems to suit them.

They regard Usha and Narasimhan with the greatest respect, and if they are ill they will come to school rather than staying at home, because at school they will be better looked after. Jess and Laura commented on the excellence of Usha's and Narasimhan's way of relating to the children, which included the use of respectful language when speaking to them; if a child has to be told off, it's done and forgotten; the children know that though their actions may be

disapproved of, they themselves are always cared for. Jess and Laura themselves felt secure with Usha too, because they knew she would tell them if they did anything that offended Indian custom. And I felt extraordinarily well looked after. Usha and Narasimhan have an undemonstrative concern for other people that appears only in the amount of trouble they take for them. Jess and Laura confirmed that there are high expectations about honesty, sharing and fairness. They said there was a strong feeling that the school was a unit, and everybody worked together. It is easy to see that children should be anxious not to offend Usha and Narasimhan, but that would not mean that they were afraid.

Narasimhan and Usha have many friends who are activists on the social front; during my brief visit I met a feminist who runs a women's drama group in Bangalore and another woman who, among other things, is helping people from the scheduled castes to claim the land that is due to them. She joked about the possibility of being sent to prison, but Narasimhan thinks she runs the risk of assassination, because she is threatening the wealth of the wealthy and the power of the bureaucrats.

When I remarked to Usha that in spite of feeling out of place in India I felt I had more in common with the people I met in Sumavanam than with many people in my own country, she said that she had found it easier to talk to me than to many Indians. It occurred to me that the theory that indigenous cultures are inherently good is quite incorrect; what activists do all over the world is protest against their own national and cultural institutions. Because Western culture is so pervasive it is seen as the enemy, but in fact all cultures need to change.

I had language difficulties when I interviewed the three eldest boys, who all gave their ages as nineteen. Some idea of their feelings about the school can be gleaned from these extracts.

Shankara: I could come to school at eight o'clock in the morning, and we had to do gardening at the school eight to nine, and nine to nine-forty-five is singing, and nine forty-five to ten thirty you have maths. And ten thirty to eleven you have break, and eleven to eleven forty-five you have English. After that handicrafts, and handicrafts are over at twelve thirty. At twelve thirty up to two we have lunch break and two to three we have Telugu and three to four science and at four o'clock we have break. Four to five we have playing time. And five we have to go to homework - when we are young we have to do homework up to five to six, and then we have to go home.

Me: What did you do at home?

Shankara: As soon as I will go at six thirty or seven, and then I have to take my dinner. After dinner my parents will talk about what they are going to farm next day, and their work, they have to do work, and they talk about the agriculture, and we don't talk anything about - we'll talk between ourselves,

my brothers and sisters. And after that I will go at eight, eight thirty to my bed. And at around six I'll get up in the morning and get ready to school and come by school at eight o'clock.

Me: Is your day the same?

Narayana: No. I am going to the college, so I got up at six clock and went home and bring the milk to here, and I get a bus at eight o'clock and I go to the college, and I come to the school at three o'clock and I went to a class, teaching science class to the children, and you know at four o'clock there is break - the classes are two to four, and after four I do my college work. And then at five o'clock I went for milk. And I come five-thirty to six, I go to the homework. The children are doing homework, so I have to there look after them - not fighting. Then all of us go to home at six o'clock. Then I come at seven o'clock here and do my college work at night.

Me: What are the other students like at the college?

Shankara: They came to college for studying and they say at home they are going to college for studying, and sometimes some people do hard work in the college, but some people only go around the college and all, talking, you know, and are not interested in their studies. But at the same time also the lecturers are not studying. They won't teach properly. They'll come one class and they skip away other classes, and they go to the residential college, they have two tuitions. They don't teach properly in government colleges. They will go for other private colleges and they have tuitions at their home.

Me: Are you able to learn at college yourself?

Shankara: If they teach us, teach properly, I am interested.

Me: When you were at school here was it easy?

Shankara: Yeah. It's easy!

Me: Why?

Shankara: Because the teachers are very fond about what they have to teach us, and they also see whether we are studying or not, and they also correct our characters, culture.

Me: What would have happened if you hadn't come to Sumavanam? If you had gone to the government school?

Shankara: I think I might stop the studies by now.

Me: Do you think of Usha and Narasimhan as just teachers?

Chinna: No. No, we don't think.

Me: What else are they?

Chinna: Family.

Me: What do they do for you that makes you think of them as family?

Chinna: They think of our future.

Shankara: If he is sick also, they give tablets.

Chinna: They spend more time on us than our parents.

Me: What do your families think of the school?

Chinna: They don't think about our school.

Narayana: Our parents think this is a good school, so they come and talk to Sir and Akka, how their children are studying, how people are behaving in

the house. If they do any bad things they come and tell Sir and Akka and then Sir and Akka will tell them how to behave, how to do all this.

Shankara: I feel so pleased at having been here in the school. Because I have been in the school I have learnt lots of things - how to teach, how to behave. Behaviour is the main thing which is different, and also the way they are teaching here. They have a proper idea about what they are to teach. I have been in private schools also, I hadn't this knowledge what I had in this school. They have to pay in the schools. And they don't even teach properly. They will come, they will do their lesson, and they will dictate the answers. Most thing we have learnt is we have to think what we are doing. Thinking is the main, more access to the brain.

Me: What do people's parents do if the parents are called in because the child is not working well, what do the parents say?

Shankara: They will say give one slap. Most of them they will say.

Me: Will you do that with your children, when you have children of your own?

Shankara: No, no. Because we can think now. These parents are - somebody are not educated, most of them are not educated, they won't think how they get problems. Before we give them punishments, before we will talk with the children - they have to think what they have done. Our parents don't, they can't think.

Wherever you are, you do not need punishment. Even if you insist on a comparatively formal atmosphere in the classroom, as long as the children feel they are valued and as long as they have work to do that is appropriate to their level of ability, they will want to come to you and they will want to learn. One of the things they will learn is how to think.

I sent a draft of this chapter to Usha and Narasimhan, and this is part of the letter Narasimhan wrote in response to it:

You are so overwhelmed by the poverty that you have I think mistaken the trees for the woods. The problem is we have consumerism, violence, sex, religious intolerance, greed and exploitation of man by man and environment by man. In this context what should be the role of schools? Is there love among the people in a school? Do they care for each other and things around them? Is there a concerned effort at excellence, and finally is there a feeling of peace and happiness? We may be honest and hard-working people. If the answers to the above questions (as far as Sumavanam is concerned) is in the negative, then we are not doing the right thing. This school becomes irrelevant as far as the Global Concerns are concerned.

As far as Sumavanam is concerned there is no doubt as to the answers to Narasimhan's questions. There is love among the people in the school. They

do care for each other and things around them. There is a concerted effort for excellence, and there is a feeling of peace and happiness.

Usha and Narasimhan trust the children in their school. Those who spend the nights in the classrooms are not supervised, and there is no trouble. There was not even any trouble when Usha and Narasimhan left the school in the hands of the older boys for five weeks while they visited England, and when they returned they found their house spring-cleaned, and freshly prepared milk waiting for them.

8 The Pestalozzi School

The Pestalozzi School near Quito in Ecuador was founded by Rebeca and Mauricio Wild in 1979. Although the school is comparatively unknown in Britain and the United States, in Austria and Germany Rebeca Wild's books sell in tens of thousands. A brief biography of the two founders will give some idea of their principles and ideals.

Rebeca is a German and Mauricio an Ecuadorian with Swiss parents who could not acclimatise to Europe when he returned there as a young man. They lived together in Ecuador and from time to time in other countries for eighteen years before they started their school. They worked in the timber trade and the banana trade, and managed farms and plantations. Eventually they realised that the world of business did not suit them, and that they wanted to do work that was directly relevant to their own social and environmental concerns. They studied in the United States and worked with the Anglican church in Ecuador and Colombia. They took part in a big project for organic farming and bio-gas production. Finally they decided that they wanted to do something that was entirely their own, and as their second son was approaching nursery school age they started a school.

They were not newcomers to the world of education. When their first son had been born they had read Maria Montessori's books, and after taking a Montessori course in London had opened first a play-group in Puerto Rico and then a nursery school in Cali, Colombia. Then followed the five years of the organic farming project, during which time their son went to the ordinary state primary school. In 1977, when the project was over and their second son was two and a half years old, they moved into the country near Quito where they set up a new kindergarten with four children. They named it after Pestalozzi, the Swiss educator, but now it is usually called simply the "Pesta". A primary department started in 1979, and the school grew rapidly. In 1986 a secondary department was added in response to pressure from students and parents, and it now has 190 pupils up to the age of eighteen; the kindergarten has about forty children, the primaria a hundred and twenty, and the secundaria about thirty.

The children have a great deal of freedom, but in her book *Erziehung zum Sein* ("Education for Being"), written in 1982, Rebeca Wild went out of her way to point out that it is not an anti-authoritarian school. Her preferred description was an "active" school. The two main distinguishing features of the active school were, firstly, that children had the opportunity to experiment, investigate and experience at first hand, and, secondly, that they were allowed

to follow their own interests rather than adult instructions. The result has been a school which is indeed overflowing with activity, but where there are no conventional or compulsory lessons and where, consequently, disruption and rebellion have no place.

The Wilds started the school partly because they were dissatisfied with the state school provision for their own children. They had read Montessori and Piaget and John Holt and Célestin Freinet, and they had studied the British idea of the integrated day, so they set out with a strong foundation of theory, which they still continually build on and adapt. They found Piaget's theories about stages of development particularly useful: in the space at the school reserved for mathematics, for instance, there is a huge variety of concrete materials; symbolic representation of calculation is introduced only after the meaning of the operations is thoroughly understood, perhaps at the age of eight or nine; and completely abstract work is left until the beginning of puberty, though even then many children still prefer to work with concrete materials, particularly when tackling a new idea.

They have found confirmation of Piaget's theories in modern neurological research. They believe that the three brains - the brain stem, the limbic system and the cerebral cortex (or the reptilian, mammalian and human brains, as they are sometimes described) - develop their functions one after the other, just as Piaget's theories suggest. If this natural process is interfered with, development will be impaired. To take one example, unless you have the opportunity to make decisions for yourself as a child, when you grow up you will never be truly autonomous; you will always be looking for systems by which to live or leaders to guide you. If a human being is not to act like an automaton, there must be a connection between heart and brain; children who are not allowed to make their own decisions will grow up unable to use this connection because it will never have been activated. They will never be able to understand their own inner needs.

Since this development is a natural process, all that is necessary for it to take place is an appropriate environment. It is actually harmful to attempt to speed it up by requiring children to learn information that is of no interest to them, or to acquire by imitation techniques that are incomprehensible to them because they are inappropriate for their stage of development.

From this stems the key to the whole approach of the Pesta, what Rebeca Wild calls, in the *Bolletín No 1* of the Fundacion Educativa Pestalozzi, "the non-directivity of adults." As the Wilds explained it to me in conversation, teaching, explaining, guiding, motivating, persuading, anticipating and pointing out are not adequate interactions between an adult and a child.

The Wilds, then, believe that just as natural laws lead to the successful growth of plants and animals, so will they also lead to the successful growth of children in their physical, intellectual, social and spiritual selves. Schools



only have to provide a wealth of stimulus and support and then leave the children to make their own use of what is provided.

This differentiates the Pesta clearly on the one hand from Summerhill, where there is a formal timetable of lessons for those who want to follow them, and on the other from Sudbury Valley, where the staff deliberately avoid guiding the children even by their provision of material. It also differs from such schools in the fact that it is not democratically run. Although the children have opportunities to make supplementary rules of their own, both when they form groups to study particular subjects and at the weekly meetings of the primaria and the secundaria, the few basic rules are decided and enforced by adults.

The three sections of the school correspond roughly to phases of development. In the kindergarten, up to the age of six or seven - you do not move from one group to another at a set age, but only when you are ready for it - children are not only acquiring physical skills but also interiorising the quality of reality. In the primaria, from around seven to around twelve or thirteen (Piaget's operative stage) children learn to understand the rules that govern reality, and find out how to get results. The adolescents in the secundaria are primarily concerned with the question "Who am I?"

At the Pesta they have discovered that children will develop according to their own needs, that is to say in the best way possible, if they make their own undirected choices in a prepared environment.

What, then, is this prepared environment like?

The school is on the equator, two thousand five hundred metres up in the Andes, at the edge of a plain surrounded by mountains that go up another two or three thousand metres and are capped with snow. They are all extinct volcanoes, except for the few that are still active. The view from the Wilds' house at the top of the school grounds is so breath-taking that during my week's visit I could never accept the landscape as real; it was not until I got home and saw my photographs that I began to believe in it. However, children at the Pesta do not spend much time looking at the view. They are too busy.

The site is about two hectares on a gradual slope at the foot of the oldest non-active volcano in South America. At the bottom of the grounds is a large, netted-off sports area of hard sand, where children can play football, basketball, volley-ball and so on. During my visit it was always being used by several groups at a time. To one side of it, among some eucalyptus trees, there is an adventure playground with a wheel-run, a big wooden tower and various swings.

The first building at the bottom of the slope is the kindergarten, a large circular building with a small courtyard in the middle. Like all the buildings on the site, it is made of wood, and has grass growing on the roof. There is a veranda all round which has room underneath it on the downhill side for a

woodwork room, along with other play-spaces. The indoor space upstairs is divided into stalls, rather like a stable, so each stall feels private, though an adult can look over the top and see what is going on. Each stall is different: there is a doll-room, a dressing-up room, a kitchen, a shop, a dolls' house, a place to rest, painting materials, building blocks, musical instruments, Montessori materials and more besides. In the woodwork space children really saw wood, and in the kitchen they really peel and chop vegetables and cook food.

The kindergarten has a fence round it, to remind older children to keep out as much as to keep the youngest ones in, though older children may go in with permission.

A little further up the hill is a big rectangular building which includes the large area for maths on the top floor, flanked by a rather smaller space for language. On the ground floor there is a kitchen for the primaria and spaces for crafts, reading, geography and science. Everywhere there are displays to look at and materials to use, rather on the lines of the best British primary schools of the seventies, but there is no compulsion to take advantage of them, and I always saw more children out of doors than in.

Further up again is another building with a common room for the secundaria, a big room for meetings, a room full of board and card games, and on the top floor is the school's only classroom, where those children who wish to study together may meet by agreement, with or without a member of staff.

Beyond this building is the office, and beyond that again the Wilds' house, where I was given the guest bedroom and wonderful food and the Wilds gave up a great deal of their valuable time to make sure I was well entertained as well as learning as much as possible about the school.

There is at least one member of staff responsible for each area of the school, though this is not at first obvious, because they remain as inconspicuous as possible. Each week they rotate, so someone who is in the craft area one week may be on the sports area the next. As they watch, they keep careful records of what each child is doing, using an elaborate official coding system; these records are collated in the office and discussed at weekly staff-meetings.

I was told that if a small child climbs up somewhere, gets stuck and calls for help, a teacher will go and stand nearby but will not lift the child down. I asked whether there were other counter-intuitive guide-lines for the staff, and was told only that they were of course never to shout, but when there were problems they were to move close to the children involved and speak quietly. It also seems to be the case that adults do not approach children unless they are summoned or there is a problem that requires adult intervention. Teachers are encouraged to tell stories rather than to read them aloud, because when you read aloud your attention is on the book, and when you tell

a story your attention is on the child. It is considered very important that children should not see teachers as people who control them, so special supervisors are appointed to keep order on the school buses that bring the children to school or take them swimming.

I was a guest at the school for a week in November 1996, and received a number of surprises. The first was the list of instructions for visitors. You must not talk to other visitors or to the staff, and you may only speak to children if they speak to you first. You must observe singly and not in groups. If you want to watch what a child is doing for some time, you must ask for permission and, if it is granted, sit down. You may not make videos or take photographs. You may not take your clothes off. This last instruction was added because a visitor, perhaps used to free schools of a rather different sort, actually did start to wander around with nothing on. The others, as I came to see on Friday, the official visiting day, were all necessary if the school were not to be totally disrupted by the number of people who arrived. I found myself actually becoming indignant when I saw a woman asking a child what she was doing, because it was so clearly a discourteous interruption.

I was surprised when Rebeca Wild greeted all the staff by exchanging kisses, and then, on my second day, finding that I got kisses from the women teachers as well. I was surprised to be introduced to all the staff but none of the children. I was surprised that the school day only ran from eight until twelve. I was surprised to find that the children were so used to visitors that at first I might as well have been a piece of furniture. I was surprised by how quiet the school was; the only noisy game was one in which a line of children walked up four sloping poles, arranged in a square, and the first two in the line tried to push each other off; the noise was the cheering for the different contestants. I was surprised that the school was so tidy. I was surprised that there was a craze for marbles, in a version that I had not seen before and had not learnt to understand by the end of the week.

During my visit I was invited to attend a staff meeting to ask questions, and to one of the weekly meetings of the primaria to listen; I was allowed to make a tape-recording of some students and ex-students of the secundaria, answering questions that I tried to ask in Spanish but ended by having translated by Rebeca. I recorded a long interview with an ex-student who happened to be French so I could understand without difficulty. Because, as a visitor, I was not allowed to talk to current students, and the diaries that are kept by all the secundaria students are quite properly confidential, these two recorded sessions are my only sources of student opinion of the school. However, the staff seem to learn from the school in much the same way as the students do, so it is illuminating to give an account of my meeting with them.

There are staff meetings four afternoons a week, for two to two and half hours. These four sessions are devoted to: the kindergarten and the primaria;

the secundaria; general deepening of understanding (usually starting from an everyday situation); and practical experience with the materials available in the school, particularly the maths materials.

The meeting I was invited to was a special one, preceded by a barbecue in the Wilds' garden.

The questions and answers which follow were not recorded, and indeed they were conducted in Spanish, but this is part of what I think I was told.

Me: What is the most important aspect of the Pesta for you?

Answers: My children want to come to the school.

I am able to be myself with my children at home.

The respect which is shown to the children extends to the adults as well, staff, husbands, family, neighbours; one's own sense of oneself is strengthened (or discovered).

I work in the office and I find I am making conscious decisions all the time to facilitate the running of the school and the relationships within it. My decisions are conscious, they are not in obedience to some code of instruction.

I only came to appreciate the school gradually, and now I have learnt that I am respected and I respect others and I have a vision of some kind of future for myself.

Children are not told what to do (and only rarely told what not to do).

The most important thing is the prepared environment where the children may choose.

Me: How do the children learn to keep the school so tidy?

Answers: There are very few rules, and everything is done for their benefit, so they understand that it is right to obey the few rules that there are.

Other children who want to use the equipment want it put away properly, tidied up, etc.

In the kindergarten adults ask the children to put things away and do it for them if they are not yet ready.

In the primaria they do not lose face when they are reminded that something must be put away. It is done in a way which allows them to keep their dignity and to feel they are still appreciated as people.

Me: How do the teachers come to learn how to behave in the Pesta?

Answers: There are five-month courses, which take place on Saturday mornings only. I took one such course. I am a homeopath and a pianist and it was strange to me. Then I came and observed for three weeks, and it was very hard for me to observe and not to talk.

I learnt first by imitation, and then I realised that I could be myself within the system, and now I am more richly myself than I was before.

You come and you make mistake after mistake, but there are staff meetings in the afternoons and the children help you to learn.

The tolerance of the children is a lesson in itself.

When you have been here a while it seems natural.

The meeting of the primaria that I attended was chaired by one of the children, with a secretary to assist her, also a child. These meetings are compulsory. There were some announcements from Rebeca, including a complaint about eating on the buses on the way to the swimming-pool. It was agreed that people who misbehaved on the buses should not be allowed to go swimming the next week.

A number of jobs, such as tidying certain areas or fetching the food and drink at break time, had to be given out. This was done according to a system devised by an earlier meeting. Firstly the popular jobs were given to those who volunteered. Then less popular jobs were handed out as punishments to anyone who arrived late or spoke out of turn. If there were still jobs left unfilled, an hourglass was used. If there were no volunteers for any job within one minute, the chair simply selected someone to do it.

This was followed by a number of reports of minor infractions of rules, often disinterested reports in that the speaker had not been personally affected by the infraction. Most of these were dealt with fairly swiftly, but there was much discussion about a girl who had invited some friends to a party at her house, which was nearby, and at the end of school had led them out of the bottom gate instead of getting them to check themselves out by the buses. In the end no action was taken because there was so much conflicting evidence about whose fault it was, and so much uncertainty about the actual rule that had been broken. After the meeting the environment was adjusted to make a recurrence of such an incident unlikely - to put it more concretely, the bottom gate was replaced by fencing.

The two group meetings, one for the primaria and one for the secundaria, were the only events during the week at which attendance was compulsory, but there were a surprisingly large number of adult-led group activities,

considering the Wilds' philosophical opposition to the idea of lessons. I think for them the word "lesson" must imply being required to memorise information without necessarily having understood it. I saw several craft sessions that I would have described as lessons, and I saw a visiting teacher showing quite a large group how to construct a three-dimensional model of a landscape from a contour map. The school had a timetable divided into half-hour periods (often combined into doubles) which announced the two group meetings, two calculation classes, history, study, creative writing, three English groups, biology, crafts for Christmas, swimming, story and five Freinet groups. Freinet groups are collections of children who want the experience of working together, and may be pursuing any topic or any activity. There is something on offer in each of the thirty periods timetabled, but there are a hundred and ninety children in the school, so usually at least a hundred and seventy of them are pursuing individual interests, which in most cases will mean playing. Play, as Maria Montessori said, is the child's work. It is mostly the secundaria who choose to attend timetabled activities.

There are also opportunities to do things outside the school. Twice a week there are cycle expeditions which leave at six in the morning, to avoid the worst of the heat of the day. These have become an important part of the life of the school for many of the older students. There are also frequent excursions. I went with a bus-load from the primaria for a walk through an old railway tunnel full of bats, half-way down the side of a canyon. The original intention had been to go right down to the river, but the children decided to stay and play on an old land-slip. The whole experience - the canyon, the old railway sleepers, the river below us, the vegetation, the pitch-dark tunnel, the bats - was an extremely rich one.

From the age of ten you may also be able to go out three days a week on a work placement. Serving in restaurants and shops is popular, and so is looking after animals. If you want to do "trabajo" (work), as it is called, you have to have shown that you are able to make serious choices for yourself rather than just following others, and that you accept responsibility for your own actions. Some children want to do "trabajo" just because, in spite of all the opportunities around them, they can find no activity that satisfies them, and they feel that this problem will be solved if they try something new. The search for novelty is not considered a proper reason for wanting to work; it is more important to develop your ability to make use of what there is around you already. Children considered to be too immature sometimes ask to do "trabajo", but they do not receive permission.

Rebeca took me to visit two twelve-year-old girls who were working at an animal sanctuary where mistreated or illegally trapped pets were helped to recover and then returned to the wild. The most spectacular prisoner was a

condor. It was feeding time when we arrived, and the girls were in the cages, taking a real, practical responsibility.

There are careful limits imposed to preserve the prepared environment, and to make sure that children do not get involved in activities that are beyond their stage of development. There are computers in the office, for instance, but they can only be used by those whose sensory-motor skills are already developed. Television at home is strongly discouraged, because it is believed to cause neurological damage. When the children asked for a rumpus room where they could have pillow-fights and make as much mess as they liked, permission was not granted. No tape-recorders or radios are allowed, because they would introduce an unprepared element. Toy guns may only be brought into school if they are silent.

Families are required to accept the school's approach at home, and may not arrange for outside instruction, such as music lessons, until the child is at least twelve years old, and even then only with the consent of the school. Until recently the school used to accept children from European families who moved to Ecuador specifically for the Pesta, but this is no longer done because a family's life can be so disrupted by the change in culture that a relaxed home environment becomes impossible. Parents are required to attend courses in the school's approach to education before their children move into the primaria and again before they move into the secundaria. Children are not allowed into parents' meetings because they do not represent a prepared environment for children. No new children are accepted into the school after the age of twelve.

The school philosophy springs from a wide base, and it influences everything that goes on. The Wilds draw a careful distinction between limits and interference. Do the children feel that their choices are restricted? When I made my recording with about twenty students or recent ex-students from the secundaria I did not need to ask this question because the answer became obvious. The following comments have been slightly edited to make it unnecessary to include my questions:

The best thing about the Pesta for me is the friends that I made here. They are the ones who know me best and the people I get on best with up to now are the people I know here.

When you leave and go to college you find that out there it is a completely different world from here. And it surprised me a lot. Because everything is different, and, I don't know, here they respect you and there - it surprised me a lot. There they don't respect you at all, you have to check in with a teacher, do what he tells you, and I didn't like that and at the moment I am not at a college. In my studies I did well, I passed the year, I got good marks, but I didn't like the atmosphere. No, I couldn't bear it.

It seems very different to me too, particularly the people of our own ages, I don't know, sometimes seem stupider than the people here. There are a few who can't get on with other people. I did all right, too, good marks, all that, but I didn't like it. I left the college too. I'm in another rather unusual college.

For me the best thing about the Pesta - for me the best thing is the whole Pesta. The whole environment, everything that is there, the opportunity you have to go off on a bicycle, to do what you want, everybody helps you. If you are interested in something, you don't get any pressure, everyone is free. Having the opportunity to do what you want. If you go off on a bicycle you have no pressure for a time, you can take the time you want. If you are here in the Pesta you can make use of everything that is here. It's fantastic, super. I think perhaps it helps you to grow internally. And the worst thing sometimes is that you would sometimes like other people to be able to share all this with you, this wonderful thing that the Pesta is, and they don't have the opportunity and you see people who are at other colleges and who have to do all their stupid things and take courses and so on and so on, memorise everything. From the time when they were little, people have been damaging their minds because they don't let them alone. Perhaps the most important thing for me is playing and enjoying yourself as much as possible because you can only be a child until more or less eighteen; from then on you are obliged to be an adult all your life, and the thing to do is to take advantage of it and not to try to be an adult all the time.

Out there sometimes you find you think one way and the other people think another way, so who is mad there, me or them? Here they make you see things in another way, and you go outside and - at least in my experience - they just study, study to please their parents, to get the best marks, so I keep on saying "am I crazy or what is going on?" Because they may be very nice people, these kids, and I see them as quite good friends, but they aren't, they aren't like the people from the Pesta. The ones I like best are the people from the Pesta, the friends I made here.

To get on with other people from other schools is fairly easy for us, but we have to try to understand people who have not had the luck that we had. Lots of them are under pressure - they tell quite a lot of lies and things, so relationships with them cannot be full - so for that reason it is much healthier and more fun with people from the Pesta.

I think that more than learning subjects here you learn to live, to live life. And although you don't learn maths, or much physics, those things, you learn

to get on with people, to be a more human person, and so to respect other people, perhaps make yourself a better person. You think differently.

I think that everything that I know is what I learned at the Pesta and that I couldn't have learnt it in another school, because of the freedom I have been given to decide and to do things when I like. Often in other schools you have to do homework in the evening, you don't have any freedom to do other things and you have to dedicate yourself to things you don't like and you are forced to do this homework and stuff.

I think that it ought to happen in all schools, that you should do what you want because then you take on responsibility for what you need and it makes you more responsible. Every day you decide what to do, whether to go and play, or to go and work - it seems very good to me.

When you have been here since you were small, often you get pressure from your uncles and aunts, your grand-parents or your cousins, who say to you "Oh dear, you aren't learning anything, but your cousin knows English. What class are you in? Look, you still don't know your multiplication tables, and you are thirteen already," and so you often get pressure and when the holidays come you say "Shall I leave next year, shall I not leave next year?" You ask your parents, and as they have the same methods as the Pesta, they say "Do what you like." Then you have to begin to take responsibility. I think that before I used to think "When I am older shall I be sorry or shall I be pleased that I was at the Pesta? I think I am going to be sorry." But now I am totally delighted that I stayed as long as possible at the Pesta and I have used it as much as possible, because you get put under pressure for a moment and straight away you begin to forget what matters to you. What is important is how you are developing, personally. What you could be doing in other schools, memorising English or the multiplication tables - some time you are going to get interested and you are going to learn on your own account.

Here you also learn to be more responsible, more conscientious about what you have to do.

From my interview with a young Frenchman, who had been at the school from the age of two and a half until the age of sixteen, and was now seventeen, I have selected passages with general relevance, in spite of their sometimes personal tone.

When I was twelve we started doing little outings on bicycles. Now they do a lot. It was us who started with little expeditions that weren't at all organised, along unmade-up tracks. Always with grown-ups. And now it is us who do the budget, and buy the bus-tickets. We organised everything, but the

grown-ups helped us a bit sometimes. It was often because children had relations with houses somewhere else, or places that they knew. For instance we often went to Tena, where there was a man who lent us his house, and we organised ourselves; it was us who did the cooking, who did everything, there wasn't any outside help. One person brought the sugar, another brought the chocolate, another brought the vegetables. That's how we did it.

When you are only at school for four hours the main thing is to be with your friends, and then you do a bit of work, not much. Because the strongest experiences are when you go out on trips. It's very strong, you see all sorts of things, you learn lots of things, you see different things because you are not with your parents, you are alone and so you look.

I remember when we were older at school we often asked for more time in school, but they said they wouldn't keep it open in the afternoon. I remember we sometimes stayed when we were doing plays. We had lunch here and stayed in the afternoon because there wasn't enough time in the morning. I think it's good only to have school in the morning, because that leaves you a lot of things to do apart from school, doesn't it. There isn't only school in your life, there are also other things. It's good. It's true that four hours isn't much, but it's good.

I left a year ago with a little group of friends and we went to try an ordinary school. We had friends outside who told us about the school sometimes, what an ordinary school was like, and they weren't happy when the holidays ended, because they had to go to school, or because they had to do homework, things like that. It was completely unfamiliar to me. So we decided to go and see what it was like, and I stayed a year. At the beginning it was very difficult to fit in, because you do things that they don't think of as normal, you don't behave properly. We asked questions. It isn't right to ask questions. You have to just listen, you mustn't ask questions in an ordinary school. Things like that. In the exams, I remember, I helped one of my friends - completely straightforwardly. I wasn't discreet about it. I said "You haven't got that right," and he said "Oh yes, I see," and then we discussed it. That was not normal. For us it was normal, I helped him because he was having difficulty, that's normal, but - well, in the beginning it was very difficult, and afterwards we had to work very hard. Sometimes we stayed up till three o'clock in the morning to do our homework because we didn't understand, we didn't know, but afterwards ... The first term was hard but after that the second was normal and the third was routine, we'd got completely used to it. And then I decided not to stay another year. That was enough, I had seen what it was, that was all I wanted.

There were four of us in the group. One went to Germany, because he is German, his parents are German, and he has an uncle who made it possible for him to do goldsmithery in Germany, which was his passion. He had already spent a year in a goldsmith's in Quito, and the goldsmith's went bankrupt so it was easier to go to Germany. And another of us stayed on at the school. And another one left school and now he is doing "estudios libres", working for exams at home. And I don't know what I am going to do yet.

There are problems with drugs in Ecuador. I've got friends who have drug problems. But not at the Pestalozzi. No children who have been at the Pestalozzi, I really don't know any. Nor smoking, nor much alcohol. A little because they like it, but not to get drunk. There is a lot of drunkenness in Ecuador, but not with people from the Pestalozzi. They aren't much interested because if you haven't got any problems, I don't see why you should touch alcohol. Just to try it, perhaps, out of curiosity.

I end this chapter with a warning from Rebeca Wild that appears as the afterword to her second book, *Sein zum Erziehen* ("Living to educate"). The warning applies not only to the Pesta, but to all the schools in this book.

Nowadays more and more parents and teachers are feeling unsatisfied with a style of education which used to be only exceptionally called into question. In their search for alternatives many of them have come across the account of the experiences of the Pestalozzi school in Ecuador, and since then have not been able to stop thinking about starting the same sort of work with children themselves. For this reason it seems to be time to explain why a model like this cannot be copied, even though its basic ideas may speak straight to your heart.

I remember how, particularly during the first years of our work in school, we were always getting reports back that children were objecting to being treated by their parents "like in the Pesta". The same children obviously felt very much at ease in the school - they also had good relationships with the adults who looked after them here. Nevertheless they hated it when their parents copied patterns of behaviour at home which they took for granted when they were with us. The children soon developed a fine sense of whether their parents were being themselves and their behaviour was genuine, that is to say that they were going into every situation with their children "from the inside outwards" - for example in the arrangement of the home environment, in the way they spoke to the children, set them boundaries, stood by them in quarrels and in pain, knelt down near them, gave them physical contact. "Don't do it like they do in the Pesta!" many protested. Obviously they were upholding a clear right to authentic relationships with their parents, because children need grown-ups who are not afraid of the risk of making their own

mistakes and learning from them, and so being just as human as their children, who are maturing in the same way.

Gradually the parents noticed that every suggestion made to them about showing more respect for their children had to be transformed bit by bit through their own day to day experience until it finally became a part of their own emotions and thought-processes. But that only happens when you accept responsibility for your own behaviour yourself and don't approach situations "in the spirit of" somebody else. When this happens your experiences really are your own and you no longer need to refer back to other people.

...

We would be pleased if people with courage and responsibility started new work with children in many different places which was not "after" or "in the spirit of" or "according to the ideas of" our work in Ecuador. Anyone who claims to work "according to Wild" or to have completed a "Wild education" shows that he or she has not really understood what it is all about. Our work only arose and developed because we did as well as we could, according to our ability, in our specific situation. It is simply not transferable and it is anyway not our wish to found a new system of education, for no system can really do justice to mankind. We do not believe in a kind of copyright; all we can do is show our respect for life processes through our personal decisions, and they change us and our situation from one minute to the next. What more could we wish for, than to exchange our independent experiences with others, who are doing the best they can wherever they are, and then to discover that in spite of all our variety we have much in common that gives us mutual confirmation of what we have learnt from our experience?

I hope that my book will give the Wilds confirmation and encouragement.



9 Kleingruppe Lufingen

When I taught at Dartington, which was an expensive independent school, I found myself frustratingly unable to answer one particular criticism. People used to tell me that it was all very well to allow freedom to the children of well-educated, liberal parents, because they were used to making decisions for themselves, but of course it would never work for the children of the authoritarian working-class; they needed parental authority to be replicated in school if they were to achieve anything. This disturbed me, because one of my reasons for teaching at Dartington was that it seemed to me to be trying to develop an ideal system of education for everyone. I hated the idea of social privilege, and yet I could not deny that Dartington was indeed a school for the privileged. I did not have the evidence to refute the critics; perhaps education like that provided at Dartington really would only work for patently intelligent, middle-class children.

The Kleingruppe Lufingen would have provided me with the evidence I needed. It was not a school for the privileged. It was part of an experiment called "Schule in Kleingruppen" ("School in Small Groups") run by the canton of Zürich. This is part of the introduction to the project as proposed by the educational authorities:

The School in Small Groups will help children who can no longer obtain what they need for the development of their personalities in normal or special schools. These children often disturb lessons so badly that teachers and fellow-pupils are markedly held back in their work; they have hardly any capacity for working with others. School doctors, school psychologists, child psychologists and social workers then have to take on these children, and often arrange for them to be admitted into homes.

...
The School in Small Groups is not a substitute for normal or special classes, but a complement to what is at present on offer for children with severe behavioural disturbances, emotional mental problems or limited intelligence. These symptoms may appear in any type of elementary school. For this reason children will be referred to the School in Small Groups when they have a particular need for individual attention.

There were four small groups set up, which varied widely according to the age of the children, their particular problems, the teacher's personality and so on. This chapter deals chiefly with the Kleingruppe Lufingen. Here the children did not come from the elementary schools but were aged between

fifteen and seventeen. A few extracts from one boy's autobiographical writing will show just how unprivileged they could be:

I came home from nursery school and went into the kitchen. There were two suitcases there. I asked my mother what was going on, whether we were going on holiday. She said I could go on holiday. Then the doorbell rang. It was a woman and a man at the door. My mother cried.

I went to a home. We were sixteen children and three staff. It was a mixed group. I asked the matron how long I would have to stay. She said "A month, maybe."

The month passed, and nothing happened. I had gradually got used to it, but I wanted to know what had happened to my mother. After another month, they told me, I would be allowed to go home to my mother. They told me I would be allowed to go home every third week-end.

I was very happy when I got home. I helped my father when he went to shut the cemetery gates in the evening. I always used to help. On Sunday we usually went for a walk, and they always took me to the station. To start with I always cried. My mother sometimes came to the home, too, but only for three quarters of an hour. The bus connections were bad.

I often had rows with the others. I often fought someone the same age as me, and when he was beaten he would go to the matron and say I had hit him. Then I had to go to the staff-room, and the matron gave me shit. Then I cried again. I often hoped that I would be allowed to go home again, but it was only a dream. I had to put up with it.

At night I rocked my head from side to side in my bed. Usually the matron came in and hit me and said I must stop. Usually I was so frightened that I couldn't get to sleep again for the whole night. Or when I rocked backwards and forwards I got a book thrown at my head. Then I cried so loud that the matron came in and asked me why I was howling like that. I said someone had thrown a book at me. Then she said I must lie still - "then no one will throw a book at you."

As time passed I ran away more and more often, because I felt so shitty living in a lousy place like that.

After ten years he had to leave because, according to his report, he had become "intolerable." A concerned social worker found the Lufingen Kleingruppe as an alternative to the recommended "sheltered workshop for the disabled."

Students at Lufingen, then, were not from the privileged, liberal middle classes. According to those who scorned Dartington methods, they would

need firm structures to enable them to make any progress. They did not find them at Lufingen. Here is another boy's account of his first few days there.

Today I have been back in school for a week. It's been completely different. Up to now I have been at school for ten years, but I have never had such a week. For me school was always a place where I felt really uncomfortable. I was really frightened of it. Now I've only been here for my first week, but I'm already feeling pretty much at ease, though I do only speak when I absolutely have to, like I do in all new situations. It doesn't bother me in the least when one of the other students says "You say something too." Before, that would have made me want to be able to creep away down into the deepest cellar. This school is so new for me that I really can't believe that such a school can exist: I really like the school. It's a pity that the hours pass so quickly. Even sometimes when I just sit there and watch what the others are doing, I don't feel unwanted, like I did in the proper school. All we have done today is to have breakfast and to look through a microscope a bit. While that was going on I compared this school a bit with my previous one. I thought about what I have learnt in the ten years I have been at school. I worked out that I have learnt to write, and I learnt that I should always keep quiet because I was always the one who knew the least. I did know some things, actually, but always too little for my particular year group. At this school as far as I can see people don't pay nearly so much attention to how old you are, and what you know. For the first time I want to learn. Before this, learning was always rather a drag for me. I think, too, that I can learn things. I used not to be able to learn anything just because of the atmosphere I found myself in, and because I didn't feel at ease. I think you can only learn when you enjoy school.

The teacher of the Lufingen Kleingruppe was Jürg Jegge. Born in Zürich in 1943, he began his teaching in an ordinary school, but in 1971 went on to take a remedial class (Sonderklasse) in the village of Embrach, where he wrote his first book *Dummheit ist lernbar* ("Stupidity is learnable"), of which more than one hundred thousand copies have been sold. At the end of each year he was supposed to assess all his pupils as very good, good, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. He always assessed them all as good. When officialdom finally noticed this and objected, he asserted that the reports he wrote on his students were his own concern, and he would not accept interference. If they were dissatisfied they would have to sack him. Then *Dummheit ist lernbar* was published, and he was allowed to write whatever reports he wanted.

In the book Jegge made a general analysis of educational difficulties:

1. In the present social and cultural climate there is hardly any problem that is more enthusiastically argued over than the question as to whether intelligence is inherited or acquired.

The argument, however fascinating it may be from a scientific or political point of view, is in practice virtually meaningless. Long before children run any danger of reaching the limit of their inborn intelligence, other limitations influence their personal development.

2. The nature of these limitations is important. Broadly speaking two main groups can be distinguished - socio-cultural limitations and psychological limitations. Both influence each other and overlap.
3. The significance of this for the problem of the "bad student" is that it can never be deduced from poor performance in school that a child is lacking in intelligence. The results of any intelligence test whatever are equally insignificant. What is decisive is above all the student's psychological and socio-cultural situation.
4. This does not mean that there are no such things as "absolute" (physiological) limitations. Nevertheless, undifferentiated concepts such as "stupidity", "low intelligence" or "moderate learning disabilities", expressions that are used all too lightly when recommending the repetition of a year or placement in a special class, should be emphatically condemned.

The socio-cultural problem:

1. The example of language difficulties is generally recognised. There have been countless investigations which are completely conclusive, so there is no need for further discussion of this point.
2. Usually language difficulties are only the most striking symptom of a general poverty of cultural stimulation, and a direct result of it.
3. Closely connected with this is a poverty of personal relationships. Emotions, conflicts and so on are hardly verbalised and therefore hardly recognised.
4. On top of this in many cases there is also an explicit background hostility to education.
5. The parents are usually incapable of offering appropriate help when there are problems with school work.

The psychological problem:

1. The basic requirement for psychic development is that the child must be adequately able to satisfy her fundamental need for security, protection, love and appreciation. If this requirement is not met during early childhood, or if it ceases to be met later on, this can cause psychological limitations.
2. Positive: If this need is met, the child develops a drive towards autonomy (a drive towards self-development, maturity, independence).
Negative: If this need is not met, or only met inadequately, the child develops no drive towards autonomy, or only a very weak one. Indeed

many children do not even develop an awareness of their own individuality.

3. Positive: If the child is accepted and reinforced in his drive towards autonomy, he develops an optimistic self-confidence and a positive, lively personality and he takes a joy in life. The basis for this is a rich variety of interpersonal relationships.

Negative: Even a child that has developed only a very weak awareness of her own individuality is now and again addressed as an individual. But this usually happens negatively: she will be scolded, made a fool of, punished, and so on. Reactions to this are very varied. They range from excessive aggression via defensiveness to total self-abandonment.

Jegge's remedy for the school failures who came to him was firstly to help them to build some confidence in themselves, and secondly to provide them with a wide variety of stimulus. The stories his students tell show over and over again that the "stupid" child does not want to be stupid, but is made so by circumstance, the "wicked" child does not want to be wicked, but is made so by circumstance, the insolent child is created by circumstance, the thief is created by circumstance, the bully is created by circumstance, the "intolerable" child is created by circumstance. Here are a few examples:

When I had begun pinching things I would have liked to have stopped again. But I soon noticed that I couldn't. A new wave of fear filled me with horror. The words "You can't give up stealing any more" made me almost mad with fear. You see the thought came to me "You have turned into a thief and you can't give up again, so you will be a thief until you die. I could hardly look anybody in the eye any more. You will be a criminal. The idea that I might one day even end up in prison, cut me off from the world around me.

Laughing I went to the door and called out to the others "The cow has lost her marbles" and slammed the door so that it thundered. You see by that time I had changed. I was no longer myself. Now I had become absolutely brutal and cruel. I had no conscience about anything any more. ... Today I wonder "How did that happen?"

Already in the kindergarten I had learnt that there was something destructive, wicked about me. I had been told so about a thousand times. Now an idea suddenly occurred to me. If I really had such an evil character, why shouldn't I behave like that?

The other children had no time to get to know me before I was branded [as a likely delinquent]. And straight away I was suspected when anything happened that anyone might have done - a rubber got stolen, or the blackboard scribbled over. And the worst thing was that I always felt guilty,

even when I hadn't done it. I got every sort of sermon when I got worse at things. And I did get worse. I got worse in arithmetic, worse in language, worse in singing, and then I really began to steal, smoke and lie, and got lower and lower marks.

These children have not chosen to be as they are, and with the right help they can become the sensible, co-operative, considerate people they wish to be. The right help is not easy to provide. The following paragraph is from Jegge's discussion of the right therapeutic relationship. He starts by quoting the German educationist, H. J. Gamm.

Gamm says "A pupil who continues to resist is not to be taken into account. A child who is shut away in himself eventually becomes impossible. A young person who is spoken to in a friendly way and then dares to snub the speaker and publicly reject his offers, or even make fun of them, will presumably very soon have the anger of the generous 'great father-figures' to contend with." The accuracy of this presumption is confirmed practically every day. In countless classrooms there is some stupid (cheeky, obstinate or what-have-you) child sitting in a corner who at one time had presented the teacher for a month or so with an interesting therapeutic problem. But the therapy didn't work, the child resisted, at the end of the few months he was still just as stupid, cheeky, obstinate as before. So he has been given up. (Refrain: "I tried everything humanly possible.") Perhaps he is even hated as the embodied failure of the teacher. Often such children are just passed on, from the school to the special school, from the special school to the home, from the home to the Borstal (to take, deliberately, an extreme example). In the lives of almost all these children, like dim, battered street lamps along a path, there are people who once tried, for five or six weeks, to build up a "positive relationship". But in the reaction to rejection, this relationship finally revealed itself as untherapeutic. In a therapeutic relationship, by contrast, a pupil who continues to resist is taken into account. His resistance can indeed even become an ingredient of the relationship.

Jegge tells a story of prolonged help for a drug addict: he found jobs for him, arranged cures, allowed him to share his flat, paid his debts so he could make a fresh start, tolerated lies and accusations and theft. "This is not a question of good deeds. It is a question of something quite else. A whole life, in fact. A life that is just as important and unique as mine or my reader's. A life that really had a chance of becoming rich and happy. But which had never been able to develop. Because there were no relationships which might have protected and supported it."

In this account he repeatedly uses the phrase "relationships instead of poison." The most important part of his work was building up relationships with his students, trusting them, showing them that they were trusted.

But as well as building up new relationships, Jegge also offered many different kinds of stimulus. The story of his success is often moving. As an illustration of the kind of academic transformation that his students achieved without being subjected to any standard remedial education, I quote one student's account of a series of theatre visits.

I saw my first play in Zürich. It was a performance of *Lumpazivagabundus* (Nestroy). At that time, about three years ago, I didn't think much of the theatre. Of course I enjoyed it. It made us laugh, I loved the three tramps. But it didn't give me much to think about.

We went to the theatre more and more often. We learnt to discuss what we had seen. I gradually began to notice that plays aren't just fun and beautiful to look at, but that the playwright means something with the play, or rather wants to make people notice something. For example, that the world isn't all it should be, that there are people who are being kept down. They ought to be able to do something about it, but they haven't realised, that is to say they have learnt just to accept it, because they thought that was the only thing they could do.

A while ago I began to think about equality between men and women. I saw *Mirandolina* in Baden. I was quite astonished when I heard that the play was about 220 years old. The playwright, Carlo Goldoni, wanted to show that a woman is not just something for a man to sleep on and a good, stupid housemaid. *Mirandolina*, the landlady, shows intelligence, humour, humanity and joy in life. As she is a pretty woman, a few more highly placed men try to get her, but they don't show anything much positive except money and power. So she drops them in it hard. Her love is for a simple but deserving young waiter.

Another example - *An Enemy of the People* by Ibsen. The resort physician, Dr. Stockman, had to announce that the health spa was producing exactly the opposite effect. He goes into the thing thoroughly and soon finds out that the water is contaminated. The spa ought to be closed for two years, so that the water pipes can be relaid. But then the influx of tourists would not be as great as before. It is a very unpleasant business for the resort. Dr. Stockman has discovered something in his area that only he can form a competent judgement about. As the people in the village don't understand enough about it, they become his enemies. As the situation gives them nothing to get at, Stockman himself becomes their target. There you see it, quite clearly: when someone tells the truth and this truth does not please the majority or just a few influential people, then he can't get his truth accepted.

In general I have this to say about the theatre: it made me notice different things. You begin to use your own head. And you notice, too, that some

things in the world are not right. You also try harder to do other things besides going to the theatre which give you pleasure. You get interested in things that you used to be indifferent about. You begin to be concerned about yourself.

This passage was emphatically not written by a confident and capable child of wealthy middle-class parents. The student who wrote it was in the remedial class, the *Sonderklasse*, at Embrach. Ordinary teachers had abandoned this student as virtually uneducable.

In 1977 Jegge moved on from the *Sonderklasse* to the *Kleingruppe* because he did not like having to defend himself continually against bureaucratic interference, and at the end of his time with the *Sonderklasse* it had been moved away from its premises on a farm into an ordinary school.

He was the only teacher for the *Kleingruppe*, as there were never more than six students, but each of these students had a history that made an individual approach, unshakeable support and a strong personal relationship absolutely essential. The criterion for referral to the *Sonderklasse* had been simply academic failure. The *Kleingruppe* also catered for behavioural difficulties. Two of the students actually lived in Jegge's flat.

The school itself was in a house in the next village, which was shared with two young craftsmen, a potter and a toymaker, who each had their own workshops where the pupils at the school were welcome. The potter was an ex-student from Jegge's previous school. Everyone shared the common room. Upstairs there were two work rooms, one equipped with desks in a fairly business-like way, and the other a space where art or practical work could be left out until it was finished. In the wash-house was an improvised woodwork room. The house had a big garden with old trees in it.

Every day was different, but the first event of the day was always breakfast. People sat round and ate and drank and chatted until they felt ready to start on something. Usually Jegge was there to provide help for anyone who asked for it, but sometimes he would be away, organising an apprenticeship or dealing with other administrative matters. The school ran on without him.

Jürg Jegge eventually left Lufingen in 1985 because he found that his students, no matter how well they had done, were still branded as educational problems and had difficulty in finding jobs. Where they most needed help was in their actual entry to the world of work. He moved on to start the *Märtplatz*, an independent organisation which provides people who have not made a satisfactory start in life with security, support, stimulus, training and apprenticeships.

In April 1995 I spent five days there and I was amazed. The main office is in part of the second floor of a huge and handsome old factory at the edge of a fairly big village, where I think they used to spin cotton. Much of it is still

empty, but a variety of small firms used parts of it. The *Märtplatz* also rents another space where there is a pottery the size of a small sports hall and a theatre craft workshop, which is big enough for theatrical productions. Lunch is provided in the ground floor of a small house which stands by itself on the main road about a mile out of the village. There is just room for the kitchen and two small dining rooms, which are light and pleasant. When I visited they were decorated with framed prints consisting of words or letters printed out many times in one or two colours, making patterns or images or atmospheres. I thought they must be the work of some visiting artist, but in fact they had been produced by the apprentices themselves who had chosen to take part in a special course. During my visit I was several times struck by the fact that these supposedly unsuccessful young people - young people actually considered to be incapable of success - seemed to produce consistently high-quality work, and what is more work that might normally be described as highbrow. Examples that I saw were these pictures, the magazine produced by the apprentice journalists, the photography, the pottery and the food we had for lunch. This last was invariably delicious; there was never the equivalent of sausages and chips.

I spent my first day as a pottery apprentice with Lorenz, the master, and got to know him and Brigitte, an apprentice who had started a few weeks earlier. At my request Lorenz treated me as he would have done if I had been a real apprentice on my first day. He showed me how to prepare some clay and then break off a piece, centre it on the wheel and turn a simple beaker. Then I was given a whole long cylinder of clay and a wheel to work at, and left on my own. If I had been a real apprentice I would have been at the wheel next to Lorenz's, but because Brigitte was still fairly new, she still needed to be next to him.

For the whole day I practised, and sometimes I more or less succeeded in centring my clay, but I never succeeded in making anything like a beaker, though I sometimes managed a rather thick-sided ashtray which collapsed when I tried to make it grow taller. Lorenz and Brigitte both came over from time to time and offered me helpful advice. "Pull the clay towards you, and only let it go very slowly," they said, and over and over again I just had to throw my muddy mess into the waste sack.

There were two remarkable things about this. One was the way I was immediately involved in making something - I did not have to spend any preliminary time sweeping the floor, preparing clay or making tea. Right from the start I had the opportunity to work as a real creative person. This is apparently true of all the apprenticeships. The cooks cook the lunch that the rest of the apprentices and staff are going to eat; the props made by the apprentice stage-hands are really used in professional productions; the

photographers produce work for newspapers and advertisements; the carpenters make furniture to order.

The second remarkable thing was the complete patience and absence of criticism shown by my instructors. I only knew I was doing unusually badly because there happened to be a display of pots made by a visiting group of teachers in their first morning at the wheel. I am plainly a complete dunce when it comes to pottery, but nobody minded. At the Märtplatz there seem to be no expectations, and yet the standard of work achieved in the end is extremely high. You are given time to learn.

This seems to be one of the keys Jegge has always used to unlock talents, and my day at the pottery wheel made me realise what a powerful key it is. One word of mockery would have turned me against pottery for ever, but a day of uncritical tolerance gave me hope that I might one day succeed.

The next morning I spent in the big room where people come to make coffee, read the paper and chat, the room from which the office, the photographic studio and the computer room lead out. The computer room was not ready yet, and an apprentice was painting the window.

I was struck by the easy, friendly atmosphere. It seemed impossible that all these young people should have had serious problems with finding work, they seemed so self-confident and relaxed.

I did meet Thomas, who was still uncertain what he was eventually going to do after several years at the Märtplatz, and who always wore two hats at a time, indoors and out. A few years before he had painted a magnificent big graffiti under the bridge which carries the main road over the river between the Märtplatz and the rest of the village. It is an eight-foot high street graffiti in characteristic thick, brightly coloured letters that you can just recognise as letters but nevertheless cannot actually read. Other lesser graffitiists had just begun to write their scribbles over it, after having left it unspoilt for two years. Thomas had recently been officially employed to paint the walls of an underpass in Zürich, and there was to be an opening ceremony the next day. He may not have known what he was eventually going to do, but he was not wasting his time.

And I met Gisela, an ex-apprentice, who had not been able to find work since leaving the Märtplatz. She told me that she had been seen by a psychiatrist who had told her that her trouble was that she was too normal, so she couldn't fit in with the rest of the crazy world. She has an over-developed sympathy with animals, who she prefers to people, and with small children, who she prefers to grown-ups. She once bought some live crabs from a fish-monger and "freed" them into a fresh-water stream where they unfortunately died, and she told me with pride of an occasion when her dog had been refused admission into a restaurant, so she had gone in with a dead rabbit on a lead. She had appointed herself to distribute the left-over food

from the Märtplatz lunches each day, either to a nearby child-minder's or to some old people in the village. While I was there she had also assumed the responsibility for arranging the washing-up rota for the Stube, where everyone ate. She is plainly concerned and affectionate, even though it may be difficult to employ her. The Märtplatz cannot be said to have failed her, because it is the centre of her life and gives her a real purpose.

Jürg told me that the problems that the apprentices suffer from are very similar to the problems of the children who had been to the Kleingruppe: depression, schizophrenia, brain damage, family troubles, drug addiction. Their fees are only paid by social security when they can offer sufficient evidence of such difficulties, but during my week at the Märtplatz they seemed all right to me.

All teachers, says Jegge, have good theories; they want to help children to overcome their difficulties and to gain self-respect; they want to see them developing their talents and learning at their own pace; they want them to care for one another and to grow up to take responsible attitudes in the adult world. Unfortunately teachers' practice does not usually match their theories. Only too often schools merely expose children's difficulties and intensify their problems. According to Jegge, schools are actually harmful. "Ich bin nicht mehr Schulgläubiger," he says, which implies more than just "I am no longer a believer in schools." It suggests that faith in schools has always been superstitious and irrational. The Kleingruppe, therefore, was a compromise. He had to try to reconcile what he thought and what he did, and in the end he found it too difficult and abandoned schools altogether. The other Kleingruppen, which still exist, he also sees as compromises.

I asked him how it was that everything the students at the Märtplatz do seems so highbrow. He reminded me that at the Märtplatz much of what you do is actually professionally used, such as the theatre equipment, the food, the flowers and the vegetables. What is on offer is not training, it is apprenticeship - an important difference. Your work is taken seriously and therefore you take it seriously yourself. He then went on to explain that there is no need to imitate what already exists: you do what you want to do, and you are not told that you are doing it all wrong. You make your own mistakes and you learn from them; there is a master there to help you when you get stuck, but not to tell you what you ought to be doing.

This was an exact description of what had happened during my day as a pottery apprentice, although in one day I had not developed any real confidence in myself. At times I had been rather pleased with the twisted shapes that had emerged as I tried to make my beaker, but I had been too timid to show them to anyone else. I was reminded of a remarkable exhibition of screen prints that I had once seen at Dartington College of Arts; they had been made by someone who had not been taught how to use the equipment,

and had produced wonderfully original, soft, shadowy effects with what is normally used to ensure clearly defined outlines.

One evening I had the good fortune to be present at one of the monthly cultural events that are held in the theatre workshop. (Jegge himself is fanatical about the theatre, and was at one time a professional singer of satirical songs. He has made several records.) Two hundred invitations are sent out, and usually about forty or fifty people come. There is a drink available before the performance, and supper and drink afterwards. The food, prepared by the cookery apprentices, is free, but you pay for your alcohol.

This evening it was a performance of a selection of ballads, spoken and sung by a group of three actors, including Mathias Gnädinger, a Swiss television star. They were touring round Switzerland from one venue to another. Around sixty people had come to hear them, including a large number of the apprentices. It was an excellent and entertaining performance, even for someone like me who found it extremely difficult to understand sung words and impossible to understand dialect. After the performance, tables were brought out and set up between the benches we had been sitting on, and the food was served. There was a very pleasant and convivial atmosphere, and several of the apprentices made a point of coming to talk to me. I left soon after twelve, but the evening went on until nearly four. This was an occasion where the apprentices had not only the opportunity to see a theatrical performance of the highest calibre in surroundings where they felt completely at home, but also met and talked to a number of people from completely different backgrounds. It was another echo of the sort of cultural enrichment that Jegge had engineered for his pupils in the Kleingruppe.

The next day I visited one of the Kleingruppen that still exists, the one that Jegge considered to be most like his own. This is the Kleingruppe Dielsdorf, which is in the care of Hans Wyler. Just as the apprentices at the Märtplatz seemed perfectly ordinary, so did the children here seem to have nothing unusual about them. Superficially the most remarkable thing about the place was the building itself, an old farm-house now surrounded by town. It had a very attractive main room with a panelled wooden ceiling and a row of soft chairs as well as a big table with harder chairs, a large desk for Hans and a number of bookcases. The children called the room the "Stube", the parlour, because they said it was not a classroom. School, to be acceptable to these children, must not be like school. Perhaps none of us should be "schulgläubig".

Of course the fact that the children seemed ordinary was much more remarkable than the building itself. The Kleingruppe had been set up to cope with children who had "hardly any capacity for working with others" because of "severe behavioural disturbances, emotional mental problems or limited intelligence." Hans told me that when she first arrived the one girl in the

group had always screamed at him whenever he asked her to do anything. The day started with a chapter of a book read out loud by Hans, and then people wandered off into the other rooms or stayed to chat. When one boy said he did not want to do something, Hans said sternly "Wenn du nicht willst, das darfst du nicht!" ("If you don't want to, you aren't allowed to" - the German is much crisper.) There was discussion as to how the afternoon should be spent, at the swimming pool or watching a video, and the video won the day because one boy had a cold and did not want to go to the pool. Hans took me back to the railway station in his car, leaving the group to buy the lunch with money he had left lying on his desk.

I believe Jegge's Kleingruppe was even more informal. It was also characterised by frequent visits from ex-students. This is an account of a visit by a trained teacher.

As a visitor to the Kleingruppe Lufingen one meets a school that is more than six pupils and a teacher who are trying to organise a satisfying school day together. Sitting round the table in the morning there are always a few older young people or youngish grown-ups who used to go to school with Jegge. In the course of the day perhaps some ex-pupil or other will look in to meet a commitment or simply to be there for a short time.

The pupils in the Kleingruppe Lufingen get a lot out of this opening up of their school. The Kleingruppe is enriched by having other grown-ups around as well as the responsible teacher. The pupils see and hear how young people grow into the grown-up world. Some of them even find connections and mutual understanding with people who have had similar experiences to their own.

In this way, hardly noticeably, the school becomes a place of cultural and social exchange with the most varied stimuli. A new film will be discussed or a rendezvous arranged for the afternoon. A new book becomes a subject of conversation, or someone's own professional work. Through the visits of the ex-pupils, a wide field of ideas and experiences opens itself to the pupils. What makes the difference is that this world is simply there, embodied in people who live in it. It isn't the teacher who has the task of revealing elements of this culture to the children, and who doesn't do it particularly well, because he is not an all-powerful person who can do everything and be everything. It is these people themselves with their interests, activities and problems, it is the whole of ordinary everyday life that provides this support. And then other exciting people come in, who have some interesting hobby or profession and enjoy meeting school-children and young people.

For the ex-students the school seems to be an important refuge, a function which otherwise youth clubs often take on. They come to keep appointments, to be together, to talk, just to be there, when things aren't going too well, or to discuss some current problem with a trusted adult. The Kleingruppe's house, the teacher and the former fellow-pupils are among the things which can

mean security, or even home. For the Kleingruppe itself this non-professional, everyday, human infrastructure offers an important enrichment.

All this gives some sort of picture of the Kleingruppe as it must have been. It was in its own friendly premises, away from any other school. It was informal. There were no demands made on the pupils who were given time to learn as they themselves saw fit. The doors were always open to ex-pupils and other visitors. There were visits to the theatre. But what was it like to be taught by Jegge? I have quoted only one description - that by the student who compared his previous school with the Kleingruppe after he had been there for a week.

Luckily there was an ex-student of Jürg's working at the Märtplatz - Lorenz, the master potter. He had not been in the Kleingruppe Lufingen, but in the Sonderklasse at Embrach. The group had been larger, and differently composed, but Jürg himself was the same.

Lorenz started by saying that one of the most important things was the freedom. The school was not in a school building, it was on a farm. There was no problem if you were late. Nobody minded if ten of the children were doing sums and you decided to go out and look at the cows. Nobody minded what you did as long as you did not interfere with other people. The only time Jürg was really cross with him was when they had been making Punch and Judy puppets and he broke one that someone else had made; Jürg grabbed him by the hair and said "You are not allowed to do that." But you could do whatever you liked to Jürg himself.

If Lorenz had stayed in the normal class he would never have learnt a craft, he would have remained an unskilled worker. His father had not wanted him to learn a trade. When he left school he still could not read and write, but Jürg went on helping him in his first training.

They would do all kinds of things at school; they made a crash car and built a hut, and sometimes came back in the evenings to continue with what they had been doing during the day. There was no problem with making sure people came to school, because everybody wanted to be there. The theatre visits were fantastic, and as well as seeing plays they had seen *The Magic Flute*. People kept pets - bees, goats, geese. Lorenz and a friend had tried keeping rabbits, but in a very short time four rabbits had turned into sixty, and they had to get rid of them. They went to exhibitions and camps and they went skiing, but all schools in Switzerland do all that. At Embrach you could suggest any activity that you wanted.

Lorenz told me that parents often didn't like Jegge's way of working. Sometimes they took their children away, but they should not have done. It

gave self-confidence to people who had been in despair. With Jegge, he said, you knew you could do good work. You didn't get laughed at.

In his books Jegge blames schools squarely for young people's despair. Usually parents can do nothing about it, because they cannot help being part of the problem. Schools are supposedly places with staff who are trained to help children in distress, yet generally all they do is add to their misery. Lorenz had been lucky. If you have difficulty at an ordinary school you are only too likely to be deliberately taught that you cannot do good work. You are only too likely to get laughed at.

My experience at the pottery wheel in Lorenz's workshop emphasised the importance of this. At the Kleingruppe (or in my case in the pottery workshop) you were under no pressure, and you saw that with time you would be able to do good work and you found you wanted to. At the Kleingruppe (or in the pottery workshop) you knew you wouldn't get laughed at. These were perhaps the most important points of all.

These may not be particularly important issues for the secure, confident children of the liberal middle class, but they are absolutely vital for children who are socially or culturally deprived. These are the children who most need freedom in order to acquire self-esteem and a sense of purpose.

I end this chapter with an extract from a letter to Jegge from a former pupil. It shows on the one hand the wonderful, humorous self-confidence of the writer, but it stresses yet again the extraordinary inadequacies of officialdom, and reminds us forcibly how important the liberal education methods of "half-way sensible" people are for those who have never been treated in such a civilised way before.

In the fifth year two of us had to do an intelligence test at the end of the year. I was second. It was in a little tiny room. I was tense about what might happen. I had a cold and I hadn't got a handkerchief. That was very embarrassing. A man came in who I had never seen before. This test lasted half an hour. After this half-hour this man knew that I was very slow intellectually. In the assessment it said that I was nice but not sufficiently intelligent. The test forms have been lost or mislaid by the school welfare people or whoever is responsible for them.

This business is beginning to interest me, although I know what would have happened if I had finished normal schooling. I wouldn't be the person I am now. Thanks to a half-way sensible person, who set himself the task of spending a few years of his life helping dimboes like me.

But I have gone completely off the point. That often happens with dimboes like me. I can't do enough with my head. That's what some superior brute from the army told me when I enlisted for national service, and it made me feel much better. Another thing that makes me laugh is that half-hour the man needed to pass judgement over me. It's very comforting to know that

there are still people who can catch on so quickly. It shows why they spend such a long time on their studies.

10 Mirambika

Mirambika is on the campus of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in New Delhi. Here are some quotations from the 1994-95 prospectus:

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are the source from which Mirambika flows. A sacred source, silently nourishing, nurturing, sustaining Mirambika and all those who come in contact with Mirambika.

They are also visionaries, and their visions have the power of realization, the Truth power. They have brought down into our human atmosphere the Possibility of a perfect and immortal existence, lived in the mind, life and body of the human race, a divine life in a divine body.

Sri Aurobindo left his physical body on December 5, 1950. However, his spiritual force and silent spiritual action continue to inspire and concretely guide seekers of the spiritual path who have accepted Sri Aurobindo and his yoga.

The Mother left her physical body on November 17, 1973. Her spiritual Presence still pervades the subtle atmosphere on earth, dynamically and concretely involved with the yogic work of transforming life and being.

To western eyes like mine such language reads like submission to spiritual authority, an abdication of freedom, but we misunderstand. As Matthijs Cornelissen, one of the first founders of the school, wrote to me in a letter:

The very aim of all spirituality is obviously freedom. So much so that the whole endeavour is often described as the search for 'liberation' or mukti. The confusion stems maybe from the fact that the spiritual aim is not primarily freedom from outer bonds, from the constraints imposed by others, but freedom from inner bonds, from the limitations imposed by our own nature.

The extent of our misunderstanding is emphasised by what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother put down as the first principle of true teaching, which is that nothing can be taught.

Nothing can be taught! Nowhere else have I read such a concise and provocative expression of this enchanting idea; though many of the schools in this book would share it, most would make qualifications. Matthijs himself commented that "it can be practised to perfection only by one who sees the Divine in each child, all the time."

The next two principles are also attractive, but much less extreme. The second is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth, and the third is

that educators have to work from the near to the far. In other words, they have to start from the child's own personality and experience, and "if anything has to be brought in from outside, it must be offered, not forced on the child."

Rather than arguing for submission to authority, Mirambika has always explicitly ruled it out, as in another quotation from the 1994-95 prospectus:

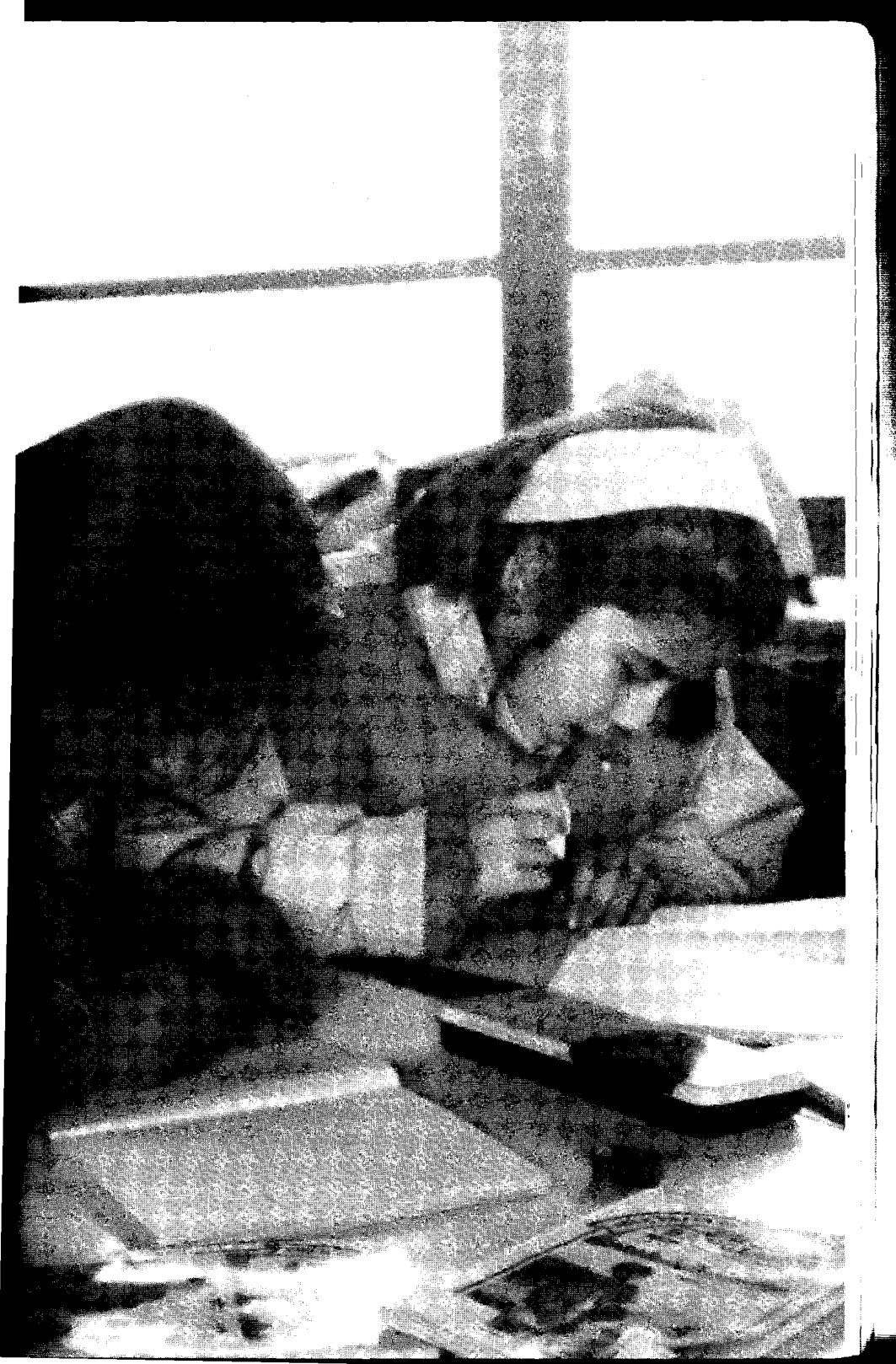
Free Progress education is based on the assumption that a human being is good in itself and that a positive freedom is a pre-requisite to help children at an early age to listen to their inner truth, so that they start trusting it and live from that. A positive freedom means an environment rich with stimuli for growth, with a constant appeal to the children to develop their power of discrimination; to give a helping hand to each child to find that basic goodness and express it, a helping hand to a child to understand a weakness and make an effort to build up inner strength to overcome it.

Punishment does not help the child to surmount difficulties. It builds a wall, creates divisions and an atmosphere in which it is very difficult to listen to the inner truth. Answering negative behaviour of children crudely with restriction means that at that very moment we give up our belief in basic goodness. Let us remember that sometimes the child has to experiment a little with a dark corner in himself in order to consciously choose and own light.

In 1980 there was a teachers' conference at the Delhi branch of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. This is how Matthijs described it:

About 250 representatives of a little over 100 schools from all over India had come together. All these schools had something to do with Sri Aurobindo's work, and many schools carried his name. But everybody present agreed that in actual practice they were doing virtually the same as everybody else. And they were doing that while they knew how radical the change was that Sri Aurobindo had envisaged for education. The consensus was that there were simply no teachers who could translate Sri Aurobindo's ideas into the daily nitty gritty of educational practice. So it was decided to set up a teacher training programme.

The school was in fact started as a second thought, as a necessary adjunct to the training department. It started the year after the conference with fifty-seven children between the ages of three and thirteen, and ten teachers. Neeltje Huppes was the principal. Parents had to pay a small fee, but most of the cost of running the school was borne by the Ashram. Teachers were known as "didis" and "bhayas" (elder sisters and brothers), or collectively as "diyas". A diya is also a tiny oil-lamp of clay which is used to remind us of our inner light and delight us on special occasions, much as candles do in



Europe. Most of the diyas lived on the Ashram but nobody was paid any salary. The teaching was based on a 'non-system' called Free Progress, introduced by two French teachers, Tanmaya and Pavitra, who had received direct guidance from the Mother. For them the essence of Free Progress was development rather than the simple transfer of knowledge.

When I visited Mirambika in December 1996 it had grown to 150 children and 50 teachers, and Partho, who had been the principal of the school for three years, was beginning to make changes. This means that I have to try to describe two schools - the school as it used to be and the school as it was developing when I visited.

The Ashram is in a park given to Sri Aurobindo by a wealthy disciple. There is an impressive entrance and a drive that makes a circle in the garden between the buildings and the busy main street. Then come the buildings for the Ashramites themselves, slightly shabby and coated with dust. As well as rooms for the residents, this part of the Ashram has offices, a canteen, a meditation room, a shop, various workshops and a large block of rooms for visitors. The latter is newly built and incompatibly grand among the partially demolished buildings behind the main façade.

Beyond these buildings is the Mother's International School, one of the better-known formal private schools in Delhi, with almost two thousand students, who wear dark blue blazers and grey trousers or skirts. The classrooms are in rectangular white blocks, and might have been built in any western city.

Separated from the Mother's International by a wide playing-field is Mirambika, sheltered by trees and surrounded by gardens.

Mirambika, which includes a training centre, a resource centre and a research department as well as the school, is a quite extraordinary building, still unfinished at the time of my visit. It consists of twelve small hexagonal courtyards surrounded by rooms built up from the squares and equilateral triangles that expand the hexagon into a dodecagon. These twelve dodecagons are linked into a huge hexagon that surrounds a large open space with a pond and a tree. In height it varies from one to four storeys. It is all built of brick faced with stone. All the teaching spaces have windows in the outside walls, and most have only low dividing walls to separate them from the open verandahs that run round the hexagonal courtyards. There are also a few conventional classrooms and other enclosed spaces such as the library, the gymnasium, the art room and the laboratory. The roofs are flat and surrounded by low walls with rails over them, and are used as play spaces. Each small courtyard is different - in one there is a tree, in another a pond, in a third a slide down from the first floor and in another a sand-pit. At the time of my visit, the teaching spaces mostly seemed bare and uninviting because

the books and equipment were kept in cupboards, and the original bamboo and grassboard walls had been replaced by stone. It is not easy to fix displays to stone walls, and when I was there builders were letting pin-board panels into the stone. In some of the rooms there are little shrines to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, with photographs and small jars of flowers.

From the beginning, a project system was the main form of education. Children were invited to decide on topics for investigation either on their own or in groups. The teacher and the child or children would discuss the aims of the project, directing their attention systematically to the collection of information, the training of intellectual skills, the development of character qualities and physical skills, and also the development of psychic attitudes, such as awareness of the beauty of nature, or the ability to listen without judging.

All aims would be recorded, and when the project was over, the participants would look at them again to see how far they had been achieved, how far they had changed during the course of the project and whether some had proved irrelevant or impracticable. All this would be preserved on a database so that it could be retrieved either as part of a record of an individual child's development, or to serve as a resource for other children who wanted to follow up similar interests.

This meant that children were completely free to choose their own subjects of study and their own approach to those subjects, but that their work was at the same time carefully monitored. It was also specifically stated in *Learning with Projects*, the Mirambika booklet of guidelines, that:

... there is no harm in the teacher giving his own suggestions or ideas on what he is interested to teach or on what he feels would be good for the child to study. Of course one should be careful not to steam-roll as yet unstructured ideas of the children, but on the other hand total passivity from the teacher is neither natural nor desirable. After all the children learn that it is ok to be enthusiastic from teachers who are inspired and overflowing with ideas.

Teachers were expected to exercise their powers of intuition in order to be able to use them to help children to find appropriate projects, and they were advised to distinguish between deficiency needs and growth needs. Children should be wholly involved in their study.

Actions motivated by deficiency needs are directed towards reduction of anxiety or need and the satisfaction of short-term goals (like pleasing the teacher); they are beset with excitement and lack of real satisfaction. Actions governed by growth needs are directed towards enlargement; being busy with them gives already a deep joy and satisfaction and success with in-between goals increases the enthusiasm to continue.

...

A general disenchantment with study is not normal and should have a specific reason. Common ones are:

1. frustration in a key direction which remained unconscious and unresolved
2. persisting too long in a single pursuit which did not feed some other equally essential part of the child's nature or
3. imposition of some activity which was not owned by the student.

Jacqueline, who had been a child at the school when it started in 1981 and was still living in the Ashram in 1996, clearly felt she owned the activities she undertook. (All the interviews in this chapter were conducted in English, which is the main language at Mirambika, and indeed the first language of some of the students and staff.)

Jacqueline: I really believe childhood was the best age. Everything is open, you can experience everything, and you are so free, without any tensions, without any unnecessary thinkings and worries and this and that. The mind is so free that we can accept anything that comes in front of us, everything that is good for us to gain.

Me: So in school did you get opportunities to experience all sorts of different things?

Jacqueline: Yeah. I mean, it was Free Progress and we actually had free progress in every way. We were taught everything.

Me: Did you have choices? When you say Free Progress, did that mean you could choose what you wanted to do?

Jacqueline: Yeah, yeah, that's what. We had choices on our own, whatever we wanted to do. Like - I was always very much interested in dance. And since then, since that age, I have always strongly believed that I want to go into dance. From that stage I have been put, yes, that you can do it, and you have the talent, you can do it, and now today I feel, yes, that that encouragement has really made a very big change in me.

Me: Were you able to do a lot of dance when you were at school?

Jacqueline: Yeah. That is when I started, actually. I was seven, I think, when I started dancing.

Me: During the day when the school started was there a timetable of lessons, that you went to all the time?

Jacqueline: No. I mean as far as I remember not really, but yes, after a certain period. Red, Blue, Green, those were the younger groups, like four, five, five and a half and six, there was not much of timetable, of fixed routine. We used to have games and all, and I think - what my didis and bhayas said - I was never at that time, you know, idle. I was never being sitting in the classroom, I was always round the campus, in the school, always on the playgrounds.

Me: Did you have lessons?

Jacqueline: Yes, we had. We used to have English, like all the trainings - it used to be called trainings, like maths, English, Hindi - everything except for Sanskrit, and for one year I think we had Bengali also, as a third language. Second language, English, was the medium of course. Yeah, we had lessons. We used to sit in the group, and I remember after every Hindi class we used to have a story-telling. It was also interesting.

Me: What sort of things did you gain from being at Mirambika?

Jacqueline: Mirambika has given me a lot of self-confidence. Very much. That's something I really cherish, all through. I mean now I feel I am quite independent on my own, with my decisions. I'm in a secure place, of course, but I feel mentally and physically and everything, I feel like, yes, I've got a lot of confidence. And when for the first time ever in my life I'd gone to give my exams, when I did my tenth, straight away after coming from Mirambika, but I was not nervous at all. It was so surprising. I was very cool about it. Even when I gave my twelfth, I was very cool. I was not nervous, or not confident or something. And I actually did not feel that I was writing an exam. When I got the results it was like - OK, they were quite satisfactory. To some extent.

Me: Have you any idea what particular thing at the school helped you to be so confident?

Jacqueline: It's actually the Free Progress. The way we have been brought up.

Me: Different people seem to mean different things when they say Free Progress. What do you mean when you say "Free Progress"?

Jacqueline: Like we were not - we had no boundations to learn anything - if we wanted to do painting we could just do it. Suppose we come in the morning and start our day with painting, we could just go on. It's not that you have to attend. You know, suppose we are having English lessons, it is not necessary that we should sit in the class, even if we don't want to. We were not forced to do anything. We did what we liked, and of course we were guided. ... I was one of the very naughtiest ones. I was very naughty. It seems I used to boss around in the group when I was four, and four and a half. I used to boss around and take all of the class out to the playground and play, and the didis and bhayas would call us and I would say "No." They would come behind me. It was fun.

Me: And what did they do when you called everybody away? What did they say to you, the didis and bhayas?

Jacqueline: I would just not listen, even if they would say anything. I would just not listen.

Me: You never got punished.

Jacqueline: No. Of course Mirambika did not have any punishments or beatings. No. I have never had beatings and punishments. Actually in Mirambika system we don't have it. Now, I don't know what the situation is like, but at that time it wasn't, and I still strongly believe that in our time it was the best. We were in the old building, and it was very small and

congested. We had a very little playground in between with two or three swings, and the groups were open, with a circle for sitting and of course tables and chairs. It was open-air, it was not closed up like a classroom. It was quite open, I mean that was the way we were quite free, to come and go. And the groups were together, so we felt like a small family. And then we used to have a sleeping room. After lunch it was compulsory to go and sleep for an hour or so, and I never used to sleep in the afternoons, especially in the summers. It is very hot in the daytime, and it was necessary to some extent to take a rest. I never did that.

Me: What did you do instead?

Jacqueline: I would just go and play in the sun, in the mud. And I enjoyed painting. Did a lot of painting and dance and things like that. I didn't have much interest from the beginning in studies - only creative work.

Me: But in spite of that you still passed your exams.

Jacqueline: Yeah. It was essential.

Me: Did you have to put in a lot of work for the exams?

Jacqueline: Yeah. And if we had had a proper guide in our studies, I would have been serious. I think I could have done better in my exams. But anyway, whatever has to happen, will happen.

[Unrecorded question]

Jacqueline: Formal school students and Mirambika-ites can never get along. Because the way they have been brought up and the way we have been brought up is totally different. You don't compare it and we cannot interact. Because then I think we have a crash. My sister, from Mirambika, she went to Mother's, but she couldn't really cope up with it and she had a lot of problems. So it cannot be done. If it is Mirambika it has to be completely Mirambika. If it is formal it has to be formal.

Me: Can you describe at all what the difficulties are?

Jacqueline: Suppose you are free to do everything, and one fine day you have to be, you know, congested. It makes so much of a difference. You have so many rules and regulations and tests, assignments and today's kids, from class one, they are so tensed up. Right from the beginning they are so tensed up. Study study study. And parents are forcing them, you know, everything is studies and studies. From all the sides the child is being pressurised. There are a few girls at the Mother's School from the Sports Authority of India, that is sponsoring them, so we have some athletes. What the problem they are facing is that the parents want that they should do well in studies as well as in games. It is so difficult for them to combine both the things together. I mean coming first here and coming first there - it's more difficult for them. In the lower classes it's all right, but as soon as it's ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, it is so tough. I mean I can see them, they are facing a bunch of problems. Parents expect so much, teachers expect so much, and these people, if they don't do it up to mark, they also don't feel satisfied, of course, because they want to fulfil their parents' expectations.

Me: They turn into a different kind of person, these children who are under pressure?

Jacqueline: They become more frustrated. Because they have not been given the freedom of their right, or their will. What they wanted, for them. It's their choice. If I am forced to study, if somebody is pushing me on and on all the time, I'll reach nowhere, and I'll be frustrated and of course I will try, but it won't be up to the mark, and I won't feel happy, because it's not my choice. I think children have to make their own choice, and the parents, instead of discouraging they should encourage. If the child wants to go into painting, yes, let her develop into painting. Yeah, they can force her to some extent because today study is also essential, but if the child wants to go only into dance or only into athletics, let her go.

Soon after arriving at Mirambika I was given a copy of the 1989 prospectus, and I was particularly struck by the following passage:

There are a natural order and harmony hidden in human nature and in this world. Studying this scientifically is not enough. We must want to become living examples of that harmony. While reaching out to the world we can remain conscious of the relationship between the part we manifest, the part others represent; how we and they relate to the whole of creation, and how the whole of creation relates to us. We want to keep the experience of this connectedness alive in the child, and re-awaken it in the adult.

Our vision is based on the belief that a basic goodness upholds this world. Mirambika wants to provide an environment that helps the child and adult to discover and live from that goodness.

On my first evening, Partho, the current principal, augmented this vision with a quick summary of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Yoga means the union of the human and the divine, and Sri Aurobindo believed mankind is about to make a new step in evolution in this direction. (Teilhard de Chardin held a similar belief.) Sri Aurobindo saw five planes of existence, the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual. The next evolutionary step is from the mental to the psychic. To give this psychic development a chance one has to learn how to silence the intellect.

"The primal law and purpose of the individual life," said Sri Aurobindo, quoted in *A New Education for a New Consciousness*, a collection of his and the Mother's writings on education, "is to seek its own self-development. Consciously or half-consciously or with an obscure unconscious groping it strives always, and rightly strives, towards self-formulation - to find itself, to discover within itself the law and power of its own being."

There is a school curriculum for development on the various planes. When I first saw it I was inclined to skip it, expecting a mysticism I would be

unwilling to take seriously, but I read it nevertheless, and was struck by the fact that it is possibly a curriculum common to almost all the schools in this book, even though no other school makes it explicit. It was represented simply by a few examples.

PLANE	FACULTY	SKILL
Spiritual being	Universality	To empathise, relate inwardly
Psychic being	Love	To contact goodness, to see beauty
Mental being	Intuition	To read, to reason, to analyse, to plan
Vital being	Resilience	To overcome difficulties, to act with equality in all conditions
Physical being	Health	To regulate and sustain energy, to build up stamina.

At Mirambika all these faculties are to be developed together, but the lowest three planes roughly match Piaget's stages of development, or the three brains on which much of the Pesta theory depends (see Chapter 8).

By the time I visited the project, the system and the general atmosphere were beginning to change. The older groups were known, as they always had been, by the names of virtues, and I spent much of my time with a group of nine-year-olds called Perfection, their teacher Ishani and her assistants. My interviews with children were all with the oldest group of all, Courage, who were eleven and twelve.

The daily routine was described in one of these interviews.

First we come to school at 8.15, then we have morning sports, then we have breakfast. We come at 9.15, do our duties, like sweeping, mopping the chairs and stuff, then we have maths, then we have our project until twelve. Then we have our lunch till 12.45, then we have Hindi. On Fridays we have clubs and then after that we do what Didi says.

At 9.30 and at the end of school there was a period of five minutes when music was played through the PA system and everyone was supposed to sit quietly and reflect, though most read, drew or talked. Projects were group projects, not individual ones. Topics I heard about were horses, literature, the body, Egypt, inventions, making a prospectus for the school and making a model of the buildings. Clubs included such activities as woodwork, pottery, face-painting, calligraphy, sport and science. It seemed to be acceptable to walk away from any but the most formal lessons; there were always a few

children playing outside, though most were engaged in activities with their groups. Children often stayed in the art room long after their official lesson was finished, and went back again in break times.

I saw two examples of the way problems were dealt with. The first was simply a case of a group not wanting to do maths. "All right," said Bharati, the teacher, "if you don't want to do maths, just go. Nobody will be cross. If you think it appropriate not to do your maths, or to do it at some other time, just pack up your things and go and play. Do you want to go?" And no one went. They all stayed and worked on decimals and fractions.

The other situation was more complicated. Perfection had chosen to take a morning off and play cricket. All had gone extremely well for a couple of hours, but then the game had ended in a quarrel which resulted in tears. They returned to their work-space and had a long and interesting discussion, chaired by their teacher, Ishani, who first asked for a definition of the problem and then asked for solutions. The initial response was that there was no solution, there would always be quarrels, but when she suggested that they should therefore do nothing about it, the children disagreed and tried to think of solutions. They rejected the proposal that they should stop playing games together, and the proposal that certain games should be forbidden, and there was some discussion as to why it was always cricket and never hopscotch, during which it emerged that some of the boys didn't even know how to play hopscotch, but no conclusion was reached. Ishani suggested postponing the final decision until Monday, but the children said no, they wanted a decision now, so she divided them into two groups by numbering 1, 2, 1, 2 round the room (thus splitting up friends who were sitting together) and left the groups for ten minutes to decide what should be done.

When Ishani returned, they all settled back in their original places and eventually decided to try out the following system. If there was a quarrel and somebody started crying, that person was to be ignored until he or she felt calmer, and the rest of them were to try to laugh and be cheerful so as to create a good atmosphere in which the victim would soon brighten up. I was not in the school long enough to find out whether this system worked. The immediate adult reaction is to think it foolish and rather cruel, but if it worked it would entirely meet the typical child's objective, which is not to sort out who is responsible and punish them, but simply to make sure that everybody is all right.

I was extremely interested by Jasbir's theories about the teaching of mathematics. Jasbir is a well-known actor who used to be the financial director of one of India's largest corporations. He applied for a job teaching maths at the school without any expectation of being accepted; his unusual approach was welcomed. When I was there he was only teaching the younger

children, because it is to them that his theories are most relevant. It is a mistake, he says, to teach children to count. For a child "two cats" is a single concept, and there is at first no reason to place it either before or after "one cat" or "three cats". Later the child will discover that it makes sense to order these concepts, and will feel the delight of all true inventors. To be told the right order for the numbers before you see the need for it is not only to be deprived of that delight, but also to be obliged to learn by heart a series of words - one, two, three, four - that without other words attached to them seem to have no meaning.

Evidence for children's intuitive understanding of number can be found in an article written by Karen Wynn, published in the scientific magazine *Nature*. She did experiments (which have later been repeated with similar results) with five-month-old infants. Infants look longer at things that are new or unexpected than at the ordinary. In one experiment, a hand placed an object on a table, a screen was raised in front of it and the hand apparently placed another similar object on the table behind the screen. Then the screen was lowered to reveal either one, two or three objects. In another experiment two objects were shown on the table before the screen was raised, and one was apparently removed; when the screen was lowered the child saw either one or two objects. Babies looked for significantly longer at incorrect displays, showing that they knew what the results should have been, in other words that they understood addition and subtraction.

Jasbir had observed that when children are introduced to number work in the usual way, they diffidently and obediently try to do what the adults ask of them, and to understand what they are being told, but in order to do this they have to suppress their own intrusive intuitions. Dividing seven sweets between three children is perfectly easy, and it is obvious that there is one left over. " $7 \div 3 = 2$, remainder 1," is simply gibberish that has to be learned by heart.

Usually arithmetic teachers refuse to allow a child the privilege of making a mistake; instead they make the child unhappy. Yet arithmetical mistakes are accidents, and it is ridiculous to punish people for accidents. After making a mistake, a child who has not been mistaught wants to find out what went wrong. You must not teach arithmetic, says Jasbir, you must allow children to discover it. "The adult must limit herself to questions, because she has to elicit, not impart. She has to learn where the child is, not teach what she herself knows," he wrote in a paper proposing changes to the school maths curriculum.

In this paper he also described a typical case of fear of maths.

She was frightened because she had the intuitive knowledge (intuition, as I understand it, being the acquisition of knowledge of facts without recourse to

reasoning) and this factor was not taken into account when formulating the content and process of what she was taught. In fairness I must add that there are some children, very few in number, who for some reason do not feel scared, and there is a slightly larger number of children who are able in varying degrees to overcome this fear. These are the children who cover the range from enjoyment of to proficiency in mathematics...

External stimulus is not the same as internal stimulus, which must be discovered, never taught. Consider Music, Proportion, Poetry.

"Nothing can be taught," said Sri Aurobindo. "The mind has to be consulted in its own growth." "If anything has to be brought in from the outside it must be offered, not forced on the child." Jasbir seems to have arrived at similar conclusions in relation to the teaching of maths.

The influence that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother exercise on the school is not clear. One person told me that everyone who teaches at Mirambika was born into the Mother's lap, and that she knows when they are to be brought into the school and what is to be done. Partho, on the other hand, deplored the shrines in the classrooms. When I visited there was little or no instruction about Sri Aurobindo's yoga within the school, yet when I asked Jacqueline about the influence of their teachings on her, this is how the conversation continued:

Jacqueline: That's what I follow. I follow their teachings.

Me: Did they have an influence on you when you were still at the school?

Jacqueline: I did not realise it much then. Only after I did my tenth, and then, when I was mentally quite prepared, only then I started believing that - very strongly in Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Me: Do you think the school does prepare people for that?

Jacqueline: Yeah, it does. From my point of view I say yes, of course, because from the very beginning we have been only hearing Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Reading, everything we do, it's already connected to them, so the child has been brought up in that manner, so it's obvious to some extent that he gets involved with it somewhere, somehow. There are still children in the school, who still make fun of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, and things like that, who still don't believe, but I think that one should, to some extent, because we've been guided, and we've been guided by them. So I feel personally that if we are guided with Mother and Sri Aurobindo's teachings, we should believe that yes, it is true, and we should pass it on.

Me: When you were a child at school, even then there was talk of Sri Aurobindo and Mother?

Jacqueline: It's always been. That is one of the major reasons of being so much intensely I believe in Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Because since my childhood I've been hearing and you know, that's what has been in my every cell, blood, everything, I could say. Because - well, I keep hearing

everything - everything is dedicated to them, everything is regarding them, everything is done for them, everything is being taught for them.

The school is due to expand, eventually taking students up to the age of eighteen. Newcomers, though, are only admitted at the bottom of the school, where, in spite of rising fees, there are eighty applications each year for only twenty places. Parents are carefully interviewed, and if they pass the first encounter they are invited to fill in an eight-page questionnaire about themselves and their attitudes to education; they are not asked questions about their child. On the first two pages they have to say whether they agree or disagree, on a five-point scale, with 36 such statements as "When other people talk about their feelings I don't like it", "I must be liked by everyone I meet" and "Tests are essential for making children achieve their potential." The next six pages are for longer answers to such questions as "What were the influences, people, experiences that have made you what you are?" and "How will you, as parents, contribute to the spiritual growth and maturity of your child?" If the parents pass this test, the child comes to the school for a week of observation before being finally accepted or rejected. The justification for this elaborate system is that parents must share the school's philosophy so there is no discrepancy between the way the children are treated at home and at school. Partho told me that the school was deliberately offering an education for a thinking elite. You cannot accept this kind of education unless you understand it. He hopes that the ideas will spread by morphic resonance.

Given the fact that they had all passed through the screening process, I was surprised by the attitudes shown at a meeting of the parents of the eight- and nine-year-olds. They complained about, among other things, the lack of rigour and the absence of the pressure which would ensure a steady learning curve.

Partho's response to these complaints showed the direction in which he wished the school to move. He agreed that there had been too little rigour in the school in the past, and said he was helping the staff to introduce more. He gave as an example his own maths lessons with Perfection; when he told them they must stay until they had finished the work he had set, even if it meant he had to drive them home after school, they all finished quickly. After that their attitude changed and they started to concentrate, instead of having their minds in one place and their hearts in another. He was not using punishment, he said, he was only showing the children that work was important. Children of this age have to begin to acquire the skills and attitudes that will enable them to start Free Progress project-learning when they are thirteen or fourteen. At the moment they are not ready for it.

The Mother defined Free Progress as "a progress guided by the soul and not subjected to habits, conventions or preconceived ideas," and said that it is

"for those in whom the need for progress has become conscious enough to direct their lives." Jacqueline said it meant "We had a choice on our own, whatever we wanted to do," and "We had no foundations to learn anything, like if we wanted to do painting we could just do it." A booklet about the Mirambika Research Centre says "Free Progress education is based on the assumption that a human being is good in itself and that a positive freedom is a prerequisite to help children at an early age to listen to their inner truth, so they start trusting in it and live from that." Partho said "Free progress is getting confused with freedom to do what you want, when it should mean freedom to learn," and "Free Progress does not mean acting on whim." One of the children in Courage said "Free Progress means learning in a fun way, enough free time, enough studying."

Partho's changes have met with some hostility. One Ashramite told me bluntly that the school had lost its way; whereas it used to try to help each child to develop the divine in itself, now it made everybody do the same thing. That, of course, is not how Partho sees it; he told me that individuality was fostered, but sometimes it hampered the work of the group. Because so much learning can only take place within a group, a balance must be achieved. This is a difficult task, and must be achieved naturally rather than intellectually. It is particularly important in India, which has "too much of the social mind-set."

Individual and group growth are not mutually exclusive, Partho said, but they work together. The most important aspect of the school is the love between people, people meaning children and staff together. Theories are not as important as growing in love; this is psychic education. The spiritual plane is beyond the child's range.

When Partho had arrived in the school two and a half years previously he had found a great deal of happiness but he perceived no sense of direction, no understanding of psychic education and not enough learning. He thought it was more like a picnic than a learning centre, and saw free children as little animals. He made a deliberate decision to set up a structure which would help create children who were mature and responsible. If they were to flower as real human beings, serious learning would be required.

I asked him how he reconciled these ideas with Sri Aurobindo's basic principles, the first of which is that nothing can be taught. He explained that the act of teaching is the deliberate but deplorable process of schooling the mind - the teacher tells the student what is to be learnt and how it is to be learnt. In Free Progress education the teacher creates an interest, and then says, in effect, "I know one way of doing this, but do you think it is the best way?" The purpose is to expose children to experience, and to encourage them to explore it for themselves. This produces creative individuals, and shows

what is meant by Sri Aurobindo's second principle, that the mind must be consulted in its own growth.

What was happening in the school now, Partho told me, might look conventional but in fact it was not; the children were responding well to pressure and challenge and there was a new light in their eyes.

I did not set out to ask the children I interviewed about the changes, but occasional comments emerged naturally. (I have not used the real names of the children in transcribing these interviews because I always had several children with me each time, and I cannot distinguish their voices well enough on my tape to be able to be sure who said what.)

Myna: I had one elder sister also in the school. She is in Mother's School now. Once in the old Mirambika, the old building, my mother saw so many kids washing their plates, and they're happy and my mother says it will be a day-care centre or something, for me, so my mother went inside and she talked to the principal and she got to know it was a school, and so that's how we got here.

Me: Does your sister talk to you about the Mother's School?

Myna: She says that now Mirambika is also getting strict, and even the principles are getting a little more changed. Like before we had Srikant Bhaya and he was nice, but now we are growing and our levels are even increasing, studying levels, so it's getting a little strict.

Me: Did your sister have a better time here than you are having, do you think?

Myna: Yeah. That's what she thinks.

Me: But do you agree with her?

Myna: No. I don't agree.

Dehuti: Once we didn't want to do Hindi, so all of us, you know, we were on a strike, kind of thing. And we were hiding from the diyas, and if the diyas saw us we would run away, so the whole day we had a sort of free time hiding from the diyas, and it was great fun. But the next day we got a scolding from the diyas.

Me: Do you think of the diyas as being very much in charge of what goes on, or are they people you work with? Are they people you work for, or people you work with?

Dehuti: I think it's people we work with, not for. I think I work here for myself.

Romesh: When I started I was about four, three or four years old. Then we went up and in our first class we had many children, and now we have gone down. Most of them have left to other schools and Mother's International, which is next to our school.

Me: What happens to them when they leave to other schools?

Romesh: Their attitude changes and they sort of become more serious ...

Aziz: More rowdy, and bullies kind of thing.

Me: When there's that music in the morning, between breakfast and lessons ...

Aziz: It starts about 9.30.

Me: Yeah. Do you ever think about anything serious?

Aziz: Yeah. Sometimes I do. Tomorrow we have a person, we take his classes, he teaches us design and art and he teaches how to do meditation. He teaches us ways of using energy, how you can feel energy, how you can - you can feel it, you can send it around, you can see, sort of, and then we draw feelings on pieces of paper, feelings that come to you right now, and it's lots of fun.

Me: And you do the same sort of thing in the morning, sometimes?

Aziz: Yeah. And sometimes when I'm feeling tired I just concentrate on the music.

Me: Do you get anything out of the music in the morning?

Matthew: Actually no. I just keep quiet and read books or whatever.

Me: And what about you?

Romesh: I also keep quiet, or I take my maths book, and on the rough copy I do some drawing.

Me: What do the diyas do if you don't do the work that they want you to do?

Matthew: Now they've made this new rule, like if you don't do your work in the time given ...

Aziz: ... and you just waste your time ...

Matthew: Yeah. Then you stay back at school and do it. You go home after you have finished your work.

Me: Does that work well?

Matthew: Yeah. It does. So far. No one likes to stay. No one likes to stay back. Because they are alone. So we all make some terrible excuses to slip out of it.

Me: Can you explain why this is a good school?

Vikram: First of all they don't force anything down our throat, and they teach it in a way that we understand. Usually in other schools they just teach you something for the sake of it and once you've learnt it you just forget about it. Over here they teach in such a way that they can carry on one subject for quite long until we have really understood it well, and they keep asking us, not like they just tell you something and you are forced to remember it.

Sandip: In other schools when you ask it again, they get like, angry, that why are you asking it again, and can't you understand it one time, and here it doesn't happen.

Vikram: And there's no beating. Like other schools.

Me: When you do projects, do you sometimes do projects of your own, or are they always with the whole group?

Vikram: When we were younger we used to choose our own projects, but nowadays the teachers are choosing the projects for us.

Sandip: They are preparing us for the tests, for the boards, for the higher tests.

Me: Was it better when you chose your own, or is it better now?

Vikram: Yeah, fair enough. Because we could do whatever we liked. But if you look from the positive side, that was kind of positive, but now it is much more good for us.

Sandip: It is much better for us, yeah. Nowadays it is much better for us.

Me: Are your teachers just teachers, or are they more than teachers for you?

Sandip: Like elder brothers and sisters.

Vikram: Like family members.

Sandip: Like family members, like relatives and all that.

Vikram: They're not like just teachers when you go to them, you meet them, and then they teach you something and you go back. They try to communicate with you in such a way that you feel as if they're part of you, you know them very well, and all that. They're not like other teachers.

Me: What do you hope to get out of being at school? By the time you leave school, what do you hope to have got?

Vikram: A much better way of studying from other schools, and a better way of understanding things.

Me: Do you know what the school wants *you* to do?

Vikram: Study, study and study.

Sandip: No no no, *this* school wants to teach us - like it wants to make life easier for us when we grow up, or something.

Vikram: Yeah, but in a much better way.

11 The Barbara Taylor School

The Barbara Taylor School was a multiracial, independent, community-supported elementary school that started in Harlem in September 1985, moved to Brooklyn in 1994 and closed at the end of 1996. From 1991 it adopted principles developed from the work of Lev Vygotsky, the Russian Marxist psychologist. These principles were not decided by the children in the school, they were imposed by adults. In that case, how could this possibly have been a free school? And if it only lasted for just over five years as a Vygotskian experiment, why is it in this book? The questions are valid, and the answers appear to contradict each other. It was a free school because one of its principles was that the school itself should always be able to change and develop in every respect, and it is included in this book because it had an important, distinctive philosophy. In some ways the Barbara Taylor School was the freest and the most interesting of all.

Lois Holzman, of the East Side Institute of Short Term Psychotherapy, was a director of the school, and she is an authority on Vygotsky. Much of what follows in the next few pages is based on passages from the book she wrote with Fred Newman, published by Routledge (1993), called *Lev Vygotsky, Revolutionary Scientist*.

Marx said, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it." To change it, and to go on changing it; whatever the status quo, it can be improved. At the Barbara Taylor School they applied this principle to education. Where everything can be changed, the opportunities for freedom are unlimited.

Vygotsky did not accept Piaget's rigid theories of stages of development, and he did not accept that development leads to a state of maturity in which no further improvement is possible. He did not believe in instruction adapted to the child's particular level. He believed in treating children as a head taller than they were. This means that at the Barbara Taylor School, the staff related to the children as mathematicians, writers, readers, artists, scientists and historians, and not as knowers or non-knowers; they did this when children did not yet know how to do maths, write, read or draw. Playing at writing is an example of a child playing at being a head taller than himself. Children playing at writing are not *behaving like* writers, they *are* writers. "Not to see them as such," say Lois Holzman and Fred Newman in their book, "is to take mature, fully conventional writing as what writing is." Vygotsky found that when young children who would normally be described as not yet able to write were invited to use pencil and paper to help themselves to

remember a list, they would make signs of their own that they could understand.

Piaget thought that small children who were talking to themselves were demonstrating that they were entirely egocentric, neither interested in nor capable of communicating with other people. Vygotsky realised that babies communicate as soon as they are born, and that what small children are usually doing when they talk to themselves is exercising their new ability to express their thoughts in words; as words are primarily for communication, it is not at first obvious that you can use them silently inside your own head, just as it is not at first clear, when you are learning to read, that you don't have to read out loud. Silent thinking in words is as much of an accomplishment as silent reading. Children are far from egocentric, and do most of their learning socially.

Vygotsky said that people only learn properly within their ZPD (which is pronounced in the American way, Zee-pee-dee). ZPD stands for Zone of Proximal Development; what is in your ZPD is what you can do with help but not on your own, what you are glad to recognise or imitate but do not yet fully understand, what is within your range. Left to themselves, children will ignore anything that is outside their ZPD, but in a conventional classroom young people are often obliged to learn by heart things that mean nothing to them, and to behave as if they understood ideas - the ablative case, quadratic equations, political necessity, classicism - that remain obscure to most adults.

Vygotskyans identify two kinds of teaching, the do-it-like-this kind and the try-it-and-see kind. Vygotsky and the Barbara Taylor School were all for the try-it-and-see kind, and this entails limitless freedom. In practice it means that you learn by play.

Vygotsky rejected capitalist values, but he did not set up a new rigid system in their stead, as Stalin did. Obviously any rigid system halts development, and development is always desirable. Societies nearly always seek to control people, and by controlling them they prevent individual growth. At the Barbara Taylor School they tried to use what is natural and alive in childhood to combat what in adult life has become formalised, automatic and meaningless.

It is curious that in describing this school where everything started from the experience of the individual child, I should have used two pages to discuss ideas. At the Barbara Taylor School it was what happened that mattered - and not just the organised events or the purposeful activities of individual children, but everything that happened, including accidents and fights. Children learn best from what interests them, and there is more to be learnt from something that has gone interestingly wrong than from anything that has gone boringly right.



The following account of an incident at the school which might, at first, be thought to be a wholly negative incident is taken from Lois Holzman's and Fred Newman's book:

On a certain day, two 10-year-old boys got into a physical fight. The teacher present at the time broke it up and told one of them, John, that his mother would be called and he would be sent home. John cursed, screamed and kicked things off and on for about fifteen minutes. He said, among other things, that the teacher was a liar, that she should be fired, that it wasn't fair that the other boy could stay, that he hated this school and that his mother shouldn't pay all this money for teachers who couldn't teach, that the other boy took his paper and that's why he hit him, that he was here to learn and he couldn't learn if other kids took his things. In those moments when John was calm enough to hear something, the director talked with him. Most of the things she said challenged his way of seeing and his desire to have someone fix things up - in his favor, of course. For example, "What should we do about people taking other people's things?" "If you're here to learn and you can't, what do we need to do so you can?" "You think Susan [the teacher] lied - what should we do about that?" "You know her well enough to know that if you call her a f-ing bitch she won't hear anything you say. So you need to do something different if you're serious about talking with her." "Being angry doesn't explain why you broke the trash can or why you're cursing. There's lots of people in this school who do anger differently. You can do something different too." ...

In subsequent discussions, the staff and the children were challenged about their need to see this incident as something that interfered with building the learning community/learning, as a problem that needed to be solved so learning could continue. Situations like this - in which two people feel wronged and hurt and are intent on finding out who is right and who is wrong so just punishment can be meted out - occur many times in a typical day. ... In fact, from the social-therapeutic perspective, far from being a disruption of the learning process, this incident presented an excellent opportunity for learning-leading-development. The group - the school community - was given the task of deciding what to do with what it had, which included anger, hurt, frustration, moral indignation, interpretations and explanations, along with caring, intimacy, a commitment to each other and the process we were going through. Could the existing conditions be transformed? Did children and teachers and mothers have to act out their societally determined roles of victims? Did everyone have to stick to their part in a predetermined script of telling 'my side of the story' to find out who was 'right'? Did John's and the teacher's actions have to be interpreted; did we have to find the root cause? Did we have to punish the perpetrators?

These profound questions interest children deeply, and in finding answers they learn a great deal.

My wife Lynette and I first visited the Barbara Taylor School in 1994, when it was still in Harlem. We were only there for parts of two days, but we saw enough to be fascinated. It was in a depressed area at the north end of 5th Avenue. There were fourteen children and three staff in a basement with two rooms and an office. Its resources were some books, games and rudimentary art materials, a wonderful construction kit (that I had great fun playing with myself), one computer and the whole of New York. Resources were not the main issue - the main issue was simply what happened.

When we arrived, we first spent some time in the office, talking to Barbara Taylor herself, a teacher who was by then over seventy. She had started the school after working in the public school system, and then in a Roman Catholic school of which she became the principal. When the governors objected to her approach, which included the idea that she should not insist on every child learning to be a Catholic and taking First Communion, she and many of the parents and children left to create an independent school. After several years she resigned and went on to found the Barbara Taylor School.

While we were sitting and talking we were visited by a young girl called Carla, who was delighted with the discovery of what happened when you filled a balloon with water. (Carla was not her real name. From now on all names of children and staff have been changed.) She asked Lynette to hold her balloon for her while she fetched a pair of scissors and then carefully cut through the neck of it. The water, of course, went all over Lynette, who was much amused. Carla, left holding the neck of the balloon, was surprised and embarrassed, and had to rush back to the room where her friends were to tell them what had happened. It was completely understood that it had been an accident, and nobody called her back to tell her off or ask her to apologise.

We were told that there was only one rule at the school. This had been made at a meeting, and said that you were not allowed to go out of the school unless everyone present agreed. We were warned that, because of this rule, we might be asked whether we agreed to someone going out of the school. It was not expected that the rule would hold for long.

There were absolutely no punishments, for profound reasons. Most schools try to take credit for their children's successes, but to blame the children themselves for their failures; when the children fail they punish them by imposing extra work, depriving them of privileges or excluding them from school. This is inappropriate because, firstly, we are all responsible for each other, so the failures are the school's, not the child's; secondly, to exclude children is to deprive them of the one environment that is therapeutic for them; and thirdly, people who punish avoid having to discuss, and discussion is what leads to change.

When we left the office to join the rest of the school, Lynette sat near a staff member who was in earnest conversation with a young child. They were talking about personal problems, and Lynette wondered whether she should move away, as it seemed inappropriate to eavesdrop on what appeared to be a therapy session. "And what happened next? And how did you feel? What do you think we ought to do about it?" It was only after a few minutes that she realised that this conversation was part of an imaginative game that was involving all the staff and nearly all the children in a complicated narrative about families and hospitals.

It was not just the children who played at the Barbara Taylor School, it was the staff as well. Adults usually find it very difficult to play imaginatively with young children because they have forgotten how to play without rules. They are inclined to get bored, and to think it has no point. The Barbara Taylor staff played so convincingly that Lynette had been persuaded that it was not play but reality.

If the staff at any school are going to tell the children "Try it and see", then they will have to be ready to try it and see for themselves. Even to utter the words is an experiment. The staff are learning all the time, just as the children are, and it is difficult to say who is learning from whom. Even though the staff have more knowledge and experience and skills than children, they still learn all the time as long as they play. As long as they are unafraid to play, children can be scientists and artists and mathematicians even though they know very little. Who is setting the example?

During the course of the hospital game I saw a nurse aged about five going to the computer (which was not switched on), pressing a few keys and making some notes on a piece of paper. The notes consisted entirely of the letter N. It is very easy to find this funny, but it is entirely inappropriate to laugh. The nurse knew it was sensible to take notes down from the computer screen, and that is what she did. Before long she would find out how to write notes that made more sense.

After Lynette and I had been in the school for an hour or two, a party of six student teachers arrived to observe, and because we felt that eight visitors must be disrupting the atmosphere of the school we left. When we returned the next day we were told that it had been quite unnecessary, because everything that happened in the school was important, and no two days were the same. If there happened to be almost as many visitors as children, that gave the children something new to learn about. At one stage in the imaginative game Marco, a member of staff, playing the part of a father, had sent his children to bed. A visiting student went up to one of the "sleeping" children and began asking questions, which the child answered. "Hey," said Marco, "I told you to go to bed and get some sleep." "This is my dream," said the child.

When I got back to England, I found myself talking to a lot of people about the idea of learning by playing. A musician friend told me that in Spain ten-year-olds learn to play flamenco guitar simply by joining in with the band. The first project some students at the Architectural Association School of Architecture were given, before they had been taught anything, was to design a town, and their second was to design an airship. Another friend said that he had learnt engineering because his father had turned their home into an engineering laboratory and he had been allowed to play with the equipment. I heard a scientist who had made an important new discovery being interviewed on the radio; he was asked what use his discovery would be, and he said he did not yet know, they were still at the play stage.

Other memories returned. The woodwork teacher for the juniors at Dartington Hall School used to ask them what they wanted to make, and then help them make it. At the Peckham Health Centre in London in the 1930s they discovered that children, as well as adults, resented instruction: for instance, children who wanted to learn to swim forgot to come to organised swimming classes, but learnt quickly on their own when they were allowed to use the pool whenever they wanted. Two pianists on the staff at Dartington Hall School used to play together at the week-ends, and a thirteen-year-old with a saxophone used to come in, uninvited, and honk tunelessly. One of the teachers wanted to keep him away, but the other said "Oh, but he does *enjoy* it so." The boy was Dick Heckstall-Smith, now one of the best tenor saxophone players in Britain. When my granddaughter Jessica was four she could make a good note on a tenor horn and she liked to join in when my son and I played jazz together; she sometimes played for as much as a quarter of an hour at a time. Everybody talks about "playing" music, but they don't usually think of it as really playing, or really learning, and in fact it ought always to be both.

The difference between learning through play and learning from instruction seems to be a matter of rules. Newman and Holzman talk about rules-for-result and rules-and-results, which mean rules that you have to learn beforehand, and rules that emerge as part of your play. You learn the rules of your own language in the course of play, but you are often taught the rules of a foreign language before you try to speak it, and it doesn't work very well.

Social behaviour is obviously an example of rule-and-result, and yet there are many schools that try to govern it by rules made beforehand, the most extreme examples being some of the conventional schools in Japan that I describe in chapter twelve. Adults tend to believe that they have to impose their own standards on children, in order to help them to grow up. It is difficult to persuade them that this is not so, yet the fact is that imposing standards on children is not merely unnecessary but actually harmful, in that it interferes with their development. Questioning and discussion are constructive, but commands are self-evidently inhibiting.

I had only spent a day and a half in the school, but it had been extremely stimulating. I returned in November 1996.

The school had moved to Brooklyn, where it was renting a store-front. Passers-by could see straight in through the shop-windows. Further back there was a screened-off room for computers, and right at the back of the shop another space with a raised stage and a door out into a tiny back yard. The school also used rooms in another building two blocks away for occasional courses with visitors, or more formal instruction.

Lois Holzman was still a director of the school and Barbara Taylor still principal, but both came in less frequently than before. A special educator-therapist had joined them as on-site trainer. The rest of the staff had changed. The only full-time learning director was Pete Carney, whose previous experience had been mainly in children's theatre, and the rest of the staff were volunteers or student trainees. Most, like Barbara Taylor, only came in for a few hours a week, but Ahmet, a Turkish psychology student, was there every day, and it was he who welcomed me to the school and answered all my initial questions. At the time of my visit there were only eleven children left in the school, though the previous year there had been seventeen.

There was also a new emphasis. The central idea now seemed to be not so much play as performance. From the time the school started teachers had been called "learning directors," by analogy with directors in the theatre, but now the whole school was regarded as a theatrical set: clearing up after lunch, for instance, was called the lunch strike; going for a walk was an expedition performance; putting a can in the bin was a conservation performance.

In discussing this with Pete, I mentioned an incident described by Lois in which Justin, a ten-year-old boy who had temper tantrums, was helped by taking part in a spoof TV commercial for magic pills that produced maturity. The skit began with Justin being told that an appointment that had been arranged for him had been cancelled, whereupon he shrieked and screamed and flung himself on the floor. A learning director gave him some of the magic pills, and they started to replay the scene. When he was told about the cancellation of his appointment he merely said "Oh. I guess I'll go home, then." Pete said he would have preferred to direct a scene in which Justin gave instructions to others on exactly how to throw a tantrum. In either case the purpose would have been to help Justin to see that a tantrum is only a performance, and that there are other ways of reacting.

I actually saw Justin throw a tantrum while I was there. His turn on the computer had ended, and he did not want to stop. Ahmet had to hold him down on the floor while he shrieked and struggled, but somehow the tantrum lacked conviction. "I want to finish my game!" he yelled, over and over again, but he just sounded like rather a bad actor. After a while the rest of us started

lunch, and he joined us as if nothing had happened, and made no move towards the computer when it eventually became free.

One point of performance, then, is to help people to find new ways of behaving when they have become locked into a behaviour that offers no chance of development. Another objective is to widen the ZPD, to encourage people to try it and see. At the Barbara Taylor School you were not expected to learn the accepted behaviour, to find a comfortable role for yourself and to relax, you were expected to keep on trying out something new.

As a visitor I found it difficult at first to get a clear impression of what was going on, even though there were so few children there. At the beginning of each day there was a meeting to announce whatever might be on offer and to help everyone to make their own plans, but it was all very loose, and I got the impression that most children already knew more or less how they wanted to start the day and were only listening with one ear. One of the reasons it was so difficult for an outsider to grasp what was happening was that there were so many different things happening at once, and acting games and play-fights were often the most conspicuous. However, during the week of my visit there were, among other things, outings to the botanical gardens, to a local playground and to the library, board-games, computer-games and video-watching, puppetry, acting and dance, building and planting some boxes for pot-plants, preparing for a high-school entrance test, instruction from a professional in the use of a video-camera, a lesson in algebra, reading, piano-playing, several meetings and a lot of conversation.

Development was not expected to occur without help. The learning directors did not sit back and hope that time and the school environment would solve every problem; they intervened. Several times I heard children saying "Leave me alone," and the learning directors insisting that even though it was the children's right to be left alone, they must also share the general responsibility for what was going on in the school and cope with the feelings of other people, including the feelings of the learning directors themselves. "Yes, of course I will leave you alone, but what do you want me to do instead of talking to you?" Or, if a child refused an offer of help with reading, "That's OK, but I want you to know that I am concerned about your future, and it matters to me if you decide not to do any reading. What are you going to do about my concern for you?"

Children were also expected to help the learning directors, and to help each other. When things went wrong, a learning director might well turn to a child and say "I need your help." There was also no pretence of overlooking bad behaviour in order to spare the child involved. "The others are saying that no one likes you," said Pete to Betty. "They are saying you are a spoiled brat who tells lies. We know you are not really like that, that it is just a performance, but we want a better performance out of you. We want a

constructive performance that will help the school to develop." Betty seemed unmoved, but her behaviour had so much improved by the end of the day that Simon, one of her principal critics, bought her an ice cream.

Not all the children at the school had problems, but the prospectus announced that it welcomed children with special needs, and most of the special needs of the children there seem to be psychological rather than educational. One of the reasons the school closed was that the proportion of children with such problems had grown too high.

This is a risk faced by all alternative schools, and some, such as Mirambika and the Pesta, which are over-subscribed, take great care not to select children with difficulties. That was not a route open to the Barbara Taylor School for both financial and philosophical reasons. It knew it was effective in helping children to cope with problems, and it did not want to be exclusive. Parents who liked the educational approach but whose children were able to cope in conventional schools were unwilling to risk putting them in a community where there were so many children with difficulties, and as a result the situation could only get worse.

During my visit I saw evidence of the school's success with various problems. Dean had been thought to be autistic until only a few weeks before my visit, but he approached me while I was recording interviews and asked to take part; the fact that this development was fairly recent was clear from the surprise and pleasure some of the staff showed when I told them about it. Tina, only a year before, had been aggressive in school and unable to relate to her mother at home; by the time of my visit she was a helpful and pleasant companion at home and at school. Gerry's father had been told by his previous school that unless he was put on the behaviour-modifying drug, ritalin, he would become a vegetable. By the time I met him he was open, friendly and purposeful.

I was allowed to read some reports children had written about themselves during the two previous years. They had been asked five questions:

1. How is the school developing?
2. What are we learning?
3. How do you contribute to the learning environment? Can you do more?
4. How can we do better?
5. What is your favourite performance?

Here are some extracts from some of the answers:

Mack: We play and play and play and it's very good. The older kids and the younger kids play together and learn from each other. The younger kids can tell the older kids what to do and they listen and we listen too.

Karl (aged 15): The school's growing. It's doing things not done before; instead of crazy it's kind of normal - like Justin used to get angry and pick his nose. We helped him to grow out of it.

We're learning lots of things - how to play basketball, piano, do things for yourself, how to be friends, how not to get reactive over things, how to do dishes and stuff.

Justin (aged 12): I'm doing pretty well. Sometimes I get a little food on my clothes but not much. I have been mature, not bumping into people, not leaving food around after I eat. I'm cursing less. I'm nail-biting less and other things. I think I'm ready for travel training.

Simon (aged 14): I'm not sure how the school is developing. Maybe the meetings and speaking out. I'm not getting angry over everything, not getting angry so much.

Meriel (aged 16): We are learning about the world. We are learning to love each other. What I mean is that we are learning how to care about each other, how to live with each other, how to work together.

Joe (aged 13): I'm learning how to deal with people who are hard to get along with and who are stuck on themselves. There are always going to be people like that in the world and you can't just leave them alone. This is an important lesson in life.

Frank: I'm learning to make friends, read, write and count.

What's special about Frank's learning is his order of priorities. My interviews with children produced evidence of a similarly wide range of development. Some of them still had problems.

Me: How long have you been at school here, Justin?

Justin: I been here for two school years, this is my third, and before two school years I often visit.

Me: Did you choose to come here, or did your parents choose?

Justin: My parents choose. And I choose.

Me: How did you choose?

Justin: Well, my parents told me it might be a good school, so I said "OK, I'll go."

Me: Great. And have you liked being here?

Justin: What did you say?

Me: Have you liked - have you enjoyed being here?

Justin: Of course. I have.

Me: Have you changed since you came to school here?

Justin: Oh, a little.

Me: What sort of changes?

Justin: Maaaaa ... Kapoo tadoo tadee didah.

Me: Do you like playing the piano a lot?

Justin: I do too.

Me: What other things do you like doing in school?

Justin: Computer. Watching movies. I play video games, watching TV and dee da dee da doo dadoo. And eating LUNCH.

Me: Great. What about meetings?

Justin: Meetings are good.

Me: What happens in meetings?

Justin: Boring stuff.

Me: Do you ever say anything in a meeting yourself?

Justin: NeVER.

Me: So what's the point of meetings, then?

Justin: To bore, for me.

Me: Would you like the school better if there weren't any meetings?

Justin: Yeah. I would say we can have meetings again.

Me: You think you would have meetings again?

Justin: Sure.

Me: So if you had no meetings -

Justin: We don't want any meetings. They're too boring to me.

Me: So how would you know what to do during the day if you didn't have a meeting?

Justin: I will - I will - I will - stop where I am and I'll stop stop stop beetee teetee teetee.

Me: Simon, how long have you been at school here? In the Barbara Taylor School.

Simon: Well, a year and a half.

Me: And where were you before you came to school here.

Simon: I was in several schools two years ago, I was in Winston, Beatman School, then here.

Me: What did you think of the schools you were in before?

Simon: Well, Winston drove me crazy. They got me sick for a year. Had a kind of stomach-ache for a year, drove me nuts. Had to go to a psychiatrist.

Me: Good heavens. What did they do to drive you crazy like that?

Simon: Tease me, push me around, then they drove me to the point that I got so angry with them that anybody that got me I totally punched them in the stomach and knocked them out.

Me: Was it the teachers as well as the children who got you mad, or was it just the children?

Simon: Oh, teachers and students.

Me: So what did the teachers do?

Simon: The teachers were really annoying. They didn't care about the students.

Me: And, in between, you went to another school after that. One just before Barbara Taylor.

Simon: That wasn't a good school. It was all right, but it wasn't a good school. The school was like Barbara Taylor School in a way.

Me: What way was it like Barbara Taylor School?

Simon: The space was like this....

Me: What made it different?

Simon: What made it different is that - what made it different is that we did home - classwork. Here people don't do classwork.

Me: That's a really big difference, isn't it. Do you decide for yourself what you are going to do, each day when you come here?

Simon: If there's something to do here, which there hardly isn't anything to do here, the only thing for me to do here is just see the TV and play the computer.

Me: And do you enjoy doing that, or do you wish there was more that you could do?

Simon: I wish there was more. I enjoy watching TV and playing computer, but it gets kind of boring after a while.

Me: Do you know what other things you would like to do?

Simon: Work on projects.

Me: What sort of things interest you?

Simon: Mmmm - wrestling, pro wrestling, animals, video games, computers, the Internet, that kind of stuff.

Me: There's plenty there that could keep you going, isn't there. The school isn't connected to the Internet?

Simon: Yeah.

Me: Is it going to get connected, do you know?

Simon: Maybe. I don't know.

Me: Can you make a difference in the school yourself if you want to? Can you get things done differently?

Simon: I already did make a difference. I raised sixteen hundred dollars to get the computer.

Me: Good gracious. That's fantastic. Sixteen hundred dollars. It's a very good computer, isn't it. So was that entirely your idea, or did someone else ask you to do it?

Simon: Entirely my idea.

Me: That's really great. And are there other changes you think you might be able to make?

Simon: Get the Internet in the school, get America On Line in the school. Go on more trips that are fun.

Me: And you may be able to organise that, do you think?

Simon: Yeah.

Me: Do you like being in a school where there aren't very many children, or do you wish there was more?

Simon: Last year there was more but this year it's kind of better, because I don't like too many kids in one school, you know, because kids tend to tease you a lot.

Me: What about the way the school runs, the school meetings and things. Do you think that those are good?

Simon: Those are good. But nobody listens.

Me: Do you think that they'll learn to listen in the end?

Simon: Not really.

Me: Did you listen? Even when you first arrived, did you listen?

Simon: I listened.

Me: What do you think about moving on to another school?

Simon: High school. Next year.

Me: Does that worry you?

Simon: Yup.

Me: What sort of worries have you got?

Simon: Like these annoying, these annoying, these annoying little snamby punk kids be saying like "Oh," saying "You're not cool and we are." That makes me sick.

Me: That sort of thing doesn't happen here at all?

Simon: That doesn't mean it doesn't happen here. Last year it happened.

Me: So why doesn't it happen this year, do you think?

Simon: Because most of the cool kids left.

Me: You've raised all the money for the computer. Do you do other things to help the school? Directing strike, and things like that?

Simon: Nope. There's things that I want to get for the school (laughing) just to play myself. The reason I got the computer is for me to play all day.

Me [also laughing]: So you don't do anything else for the school, you don't reckon?

Simon: No.

Me: Does that bother you?

Simon: Mmmmmm - a little bit.

Me: Are you glad that you are here rather than in an ordinary public school?

Simon: It's better here than Winston.

Me: But would you rather stay at home, if you could?

Simon: No. I wouldn't like staying home.

Me: Why not?

Simon: Well, even though I got my video games, and like a TV there, still there's nothing to do.

Me: Even though there's not a lot to do here, there's more to do here than there is at home?

Simon: At home, at home there's really not that much to do. Here, not much to do. It's better here than at home.

Me: And do you know why it's better here? What makes it better here?

Simon: I'm still trying to figure that out. For some reason I'm still trying to figure that out. After all this time I'm still trying to figure that out.

Staff were pleased by these last remarks when I mentioned them, because they were evidence that at last Simon was beginning to develop. Tina had already changed.

Me: What was your last school like?

Tina: Well, it was very strict, because it was a public school. And I hated my principal, I absolutely hated her. Everybody did. Everybody was afraid of her. And things like it was hard to keep up with the classes, because it's like you have to follow every bit of the day. It's like you want to fall asleep, because the teachers do put you to sleep.

Me: What's hard about being here?

Tina: Well, if someone's throwing a tantrum and you're trying to do something, it easily distracts you, and another hard part is having to be on top of the little kids, that's what's hard. Like with younger kids in the same class, that's a little hard.

Me: And what are the good things?

Tina: The good things are that we go on trips, we don't have to sit in the classroom twenty-four hours a day, and you can walk around, you don't have to raise your hand or whatever, so it's easier here.

Me: In ordinary American schools do you call the teachers by their first names?

Tina: No. Noooooo. You're not allowed to.

Me: And does that make a difference, that you can when you're here?

Tina: Much easier. It's like - because it's not like you're trying to remember the last name and how to raise your hand. Because you have so many different teachers in the classrooms. And you have like one teacher for let's say thirty kids, so you get a lot more attention here than in public school.

Me: Do you think there are things you're missing out on by not being in public school?

Tina: Not really. Maybe hanging out with my friends a lot more. Going to school with my other friends.

Me: And are you changing in ways - the word they use here the whole time is "developing", isn't it. Do you reckon you are developing in ways that you wouldn't do in the public school?

Tina: Yeah. (Laughs) A lot of different ways. Like in public school I'd never learn to walk away from a fight, or whatever, I'd like to fight. Feels like in some ways I like it better here than in public school.

Me: Are there lots of people here with problems?

Tina: No, it's basically the same four kids I can think of, over and over and over and over. Sometimes it gets annoying, sometimes it gets boring.

Me: How much difference do you think there is between you oldest ones, you and Carlos, and the learning directors? It seems to me that you and Carlos do almost as much as the learning directors, helping everybody to get along.

Tina: Mhm. The learning directors say we are junior directors.

Simon had been the subject of an interesting conversation between Susan, one of the student helpers, and Tina and Carlos. Simon, Tina and Carlos were all due to leave at the end of the year. Susan was planning to go to the library

with the three of them to do preparatory work for the high school, but Simon was watching a video, as usual, and did not want to come. They spent some time trying to think of ways of persuading him, acting out possible approaches and laughing a good deal. Eventually they tried out their best method on Simon, but he still refused to come, so they went without him. Later I asked Susan why they had spent so much time trying to persuade him to do something that he did not want to do, instead of going off to the library at once to get more work done. She told me that being at the Barbara Taylor School entailed them all taking responsibility for each other, so Simon's refusal to go to the library was something that concerned everyone.

Lois Holzman has said "When the group develops, everyone learns. When individuals learn, no one develops." The purpose of education should be to help children to escape from what Wittgenstein calls "the picture that holds us captive," that is to say a fixed view of the world and our position in it, but most schools only try to paint in more and more details. Two of the fundamental principles of the Barbara Taylor School were that nobody knew how the school would develop next, and that nevertheless it had to be continually open to change. Everybody who came to the school was accepted as part of it, and expected to take part in helping it to develop.

It is ironic that the presence of those who most needed this atmosphere should have deterred the parents of comparatively well-adjusted children and so become the main reason for the school's closure.

12 Japan

Before I went to visit schools in Japan, I spent two hours a day for three weeks trying to learn enough of the language for minimal courtesy. I did learn "please" and "thank you" and "good morning" and "goodbye" and a hundred or two other useful words and phrases, but what I learnt that was a great deal more important is that the Japanese language and European languages do not express the same ideas. To take a simple example, Japanese has no word for "a" or "the", and nouns do not change in the plural. Unless there is a need to specify, there is no difference in Japanese between "I am going to the shop," "I am going to a shop" and "I am going to the shops." As a matter of fact, unless there is a need to specify, there is no difference in Japanese between "I am going to the shop," "You are going to the shop" and "They are going to the shop." On the other hand there are three different forms of "going to shop" which show whether the person who goes is superior, equal or inferior to the speaker. If you say "sister" in Japanese you automatically specify whether it is an older or a younger sister. Hierarchy is embodied in the language, which obviously has a powerful influence on the way people think.

There are also many words in Japanese that have no equivalent in European languages, for instance "omaiyari," which means the intuitive ability to sense what another person wants to say, and "tatemae," which means an agreed version of the truth - not what is actually true, but a compromise which satisfies all concerned.

If the language is so different, then the culture must be different too, since the former developed to fulfil the needs of the latter. What is most relevant for this book is the contrast between the Japanese and the European attitudes to children. The following quotations come from an article by Yoshiaki Yamamura in a book edited by the American Harold Stevenson called *Child Development and Education in Japan* (New York, Freeman, 1986).

... Christian cultures, with their view of human beings as fallen creatures, who can regain an honest life only a little at a time and with divine assistance, seem to regard human nature as inherently evil. The same may be said for Freudian concepts, with their identification of sexual desire and aggressiveness in children. In contrast, the Japanese tend to think of children as inherently good.

... It is true that a pure and innocent vision of the child exists in America and Europe as well, particularly in the mass media, but there is an important difference in that the Japanese concept of purity goes hand in hand with that of adult inferiority. As Sato has pointed out [in *Eiga kodomo ron*, Tokyo,

Tokoyan, 1966], Japanese films tend to contrast the noble spirit of children with the worthlessness of their parents, representing the young as the embodiment of the purity and virtue the adults have lost. The kind of relationship often found in western films - the wise adult educating the child in the ways of society - rarely occurs in their Japanese counterparts. On the contrary, in Japanese films, the adult is purified and given new strength through interaction with the child.

... The fundamental nature of the child is perceived to be different from, and superior to, that of an adult; the transition from childhood to adulthood is considered a step down.

However, although this means that small children are treated extremely indulgently, because it is understood that, left to their own devices, they will come to understand the surrounding world quite naturally (and even, for instance, as I was told by three different people, that they will learn to read in the same way as they learned to talk), it does not mean that they are treated indulgently for ever.

On December 1st, 1995, while I was in Japan, the following report appeared in the English-language newspaper, the *Japan Times*.

TEACHER FACES HARD LABOUR CORPORAL PUNISHMENT ON TRIAL

FUKUOKA (Kyodo) Prosecutors demanded Thursday that a 50-year-old high school teacher on trial for killing a 16-year-old female student through corporal punishment be sentenced to three years hard labor.

Defendant Akira Miyamoto inflicted corporal punishment on Tomomi Jinouchi, of Kinki University Women's High School in Izuka, Fukuoka Prefecture, in a fit of anger, a prosecutor told the Fukuoka District Court.

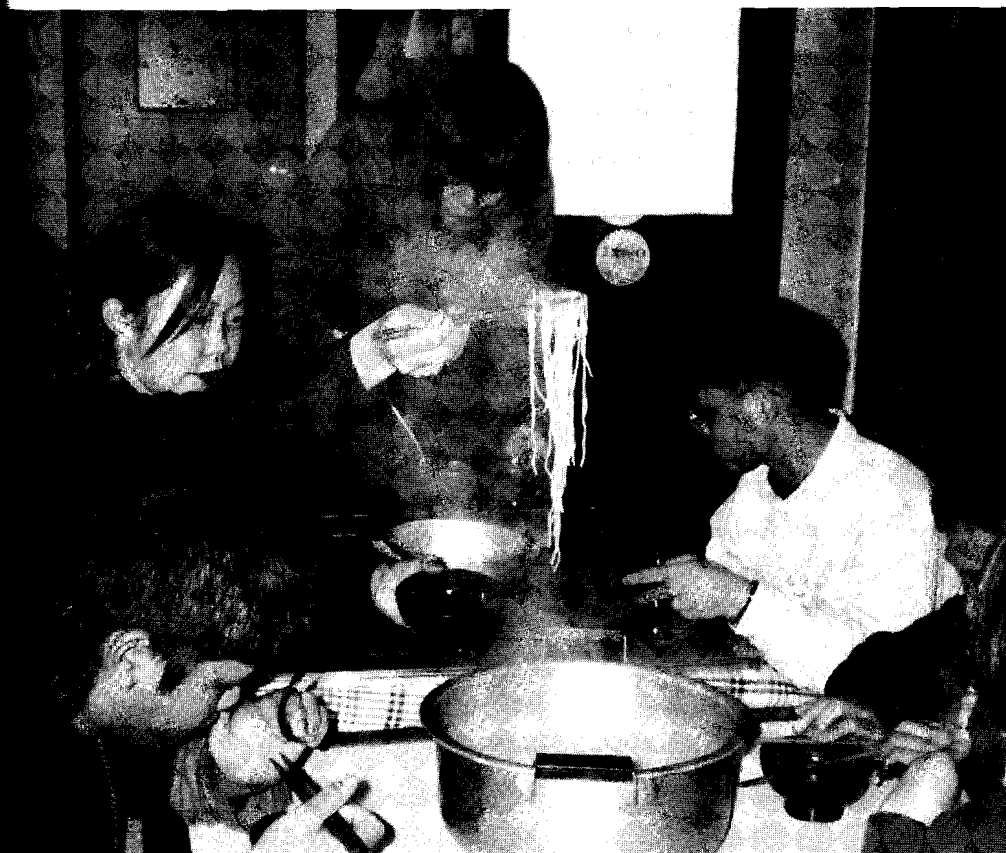
Miyamoto is accused of striking the girl on the head and shoulders, causing her head to hit a concrete pole. She died of an acute skull fracture.

A harsh sentence should be imposed because the public would interpret leniency as the judiciary's condoning corporal punishment, the prosecution said.

The teacher's counsel called for a suspended sentence, arguing that it was a sad accident that occurred because Miyamoto was over-zealous in his devotion to his students' education. The defense also said that Miyamoto should not be singled out as the only teacher to strike pupils as a punishment.

The prosecution closed its case by saying Miyamoto conveniently interpreted the law banning corporal punishment as being just a principle, and frequently practiced such punishment on his students in the belief that it was necessary for their education.

In their final argument, the defense said that half of the nation's high schools use corporal punishment. The defense claimed that the violence



Miyamoto perpetrated was not very severe and stressed that the girl's death was accidental.

Near the end of Thursday's hearing, Miyamoto tearfully apologized for his actions, saying they could never be permissible.

According to the indictment, Miyamoto struck Junouchi on July 17 after she refused to leave his classroom during a book-keeping test she was not supposed to take.

The defense submitted to the court Thursday an appeal for a lenient sentence containing about 75,000 signatures. The court is scheduled to hand down a ruling Dec. 25.

Eventually Miyamoto was found guilty of "inflicting grievous bodily harm leading to death" and, in spite of the prosecution's demand for a three-year sentence, the judge decided to be lenient and send him to prison for only two years. In his summing up the judge said that Miyamoto's intentions were "of a good educational nature, in trying to stop silly behaviour" but that he had gone too far.

This was an extreme case, but the appeal for leniency, the judge's summing up, and the short sentence all seem astonishing to Europeans, and, if we are to believe the defence lawyer, corporal punishment is used in half the high schools in Japan in spite of a law against it.

The ordinary schools are highly regimented. Not only is there usually a strictly enforced uniform (which sometimes includes white underwear, which prefects are appointed to check up on), there are often regulations governing hair length, how to walk, stand and sit and how far you may raise your hand in order to attract the teacher's attention. There is a demanding national curriculum, and no differences of ability are recognised - if you cannot keep up it is because you are lazy. Most children are sent to "juku" (crammers), about three times a week after the end of school; some go every weekday, and a few have to go at the week-ends as well. According to the report of a team of Scottish inspectors (HMSO, 1992) it is not unusual for ten- and eleven-year-olds to have to get up at six in the morning and not finish their school work until nine or ten at night. There are widespread problems including school refusal, bullying, and even suicide.

Conformity is regarded as essential, in adult life as well as at school. At school it is enforced by discipline, and in the world outside by the universal respect for hierarchy demonstrated by the language. I have read that Japanese people feel uncomfortable in a situation of simple co-operation and at ease only when there is a clear hierarchy in which they know their position. How can a free school where teachers and children are on equal terms possibly emerge in such a society?

However, as we have seen, the Japanese attitude to young children is entirely compatible with a free education, whereas the usual Western attitude

is directly contradictory. How can the idea of a free school possibly be justified in a society which believes that children do not understand the difference between right and wrong until it has been taught to them?

Omaiari, the ability to sense what another person wants to say, for which the Europeans have no expression, should also be valued in a free school. Young children depend on empathy rather than language to understand what is going on around them, but in the West we expect adults to grow out of this and to rely only on what is clearly put into words. In Japan, the developed ability to anticipate someone else's wishes when they have not been expressed is taken as a mark of maturity.

As soon as abstract words are used, rather than illustration, the differences lose their sharpness, but some of the main contrasting beliefs are these:

The Japanese believe in:	Europeans believe in:
natural goodness	original sin
allowing children to learn to understand the world	the necessity of teaching the difference between right and wrong
omaiyari	clarity of expression
empathy	logic
fitting in	standing out
universal sameness	individual difference
hierarchy	equality

I have arranged them in order so that the first of the Japanese principles are the most compatible with the ideas of free education and the last the least compatible, and vice versa on the European side. What I found astonishing in my visit to Japan was that the four schools I visited, although all different from each other and from the western schools I had seen, sought exactly the same kinds of solution to educational problems as are sought in the West; I felt as though I shared more with the people I met at these schools than they or I shared with the conventional culture of our own countries.

Shinichiro Hori, a professor of education at Osaka City University, translated A. S. Neill's works into Japanese and was so convinced by them that in 1992 he founded his own school. It is called Kinokuni, and it is up in the mountains near Hashimoto. It is a boarding school, and it started with 90 children between the ages of six and twelve. For the first two years Shinichiro Hori combined his headship with work at Osaka City University, but in 1994 he came to the school as full-time head. At the same time the school extended its age-range to take children up to fifteen.

The school had a great deal of publicity in its first three years, including more than thirty television features. The general tone was sympathetic. The Japanese assume that children will want to cooperate and to learn, so they do not expect freedom to result in the idle, smoke-filled chaos anticipated by the British.

John Potter, from Kansai University, on whom I depended for most of my information about the school before I visited it, summed up the school like this in an article for the British magazine, *Lib ED*:

Kinokuni - the brainchild of Neill's most recent translator, Shinichiro Hori - is a 'modified model of Summerhill School.' This means that the basic reason for its existence is Summerhill and Kinokuni attempts to follow Neillian philosophy in its fundamentals. Therefore, Kinokuni is a boarding school of roughly similar size to Summerhill, where children live, work and play together in an atmosphere of equality and freedom. There is no attempt to force children to 'learn' and they are free to develop as individuals at their own pace. Consequently, as at Summerhill, there are voluntary lessons and a form of self-government enforced through a weekly General Meeting. Where it differs from the Summerhill model is in the addition of Deweyan ideas of learning through experience and in its emphasis on the importance of project and outdoor activities.

There are other alternative schools in Japan, but what makes Kinokuni unique is that it has the approval of the Ministry of Education. Schools that are not so approved are deemed not to exist, so theoretically nothing can be gained from attending them. Kinokuni has been recognised because it has agreed to follow the national curriculum, but it does so in very much its own way.

In the course of a research project before the school started, Hori asked some children why they seldom played. The first answer was the one he expected - that they had to spend too much time on school work. The second answer shocked him: many children told him they didn't want to play anyway. Some even explained that playing made them tired. Hori understood this decay in children's wish to play as a decay in their natural will to be free. "Isn't it an awful society if it is consisted of those who have lost the will or wish to be free," he wrote to me. "They will easily be led by any irrational authorities like Hitler."

Kinokuni offers plenty of time for play, and the children appreciate it, as is shown by this comment from Akihiro Matsushita, a boy of twelve (all children's comments about Kinokuni have been translated by Midori Potter):

I thought about which school was better, the local school or Kinokuni, because I had friends in the local school but no friends at Kinokuni. But my

mother said, you can make friends. So I changed my mind. When I came to Kinokuni I made friends and also I learned how to study and a different kind of play which I didn't know about at the local school. I am very glad I came here.

I spent four delightful days there, sometimes puzzled and sometimes very much at ease.

As is the custom in Japanese homes, everyone took off their shoes when they went indoors. Some put on indoor shoes, but in spite of the cold some went barefoot. This seemed absolutely unquestionable in all the schools I visited, though apparently in the state schools children keep their shoes on. It took me by surprise, because of the difficulty of persuading English children even to change out of their Wellington boots. It meant that chasing games had to be either indoors or out of doors, because when you are being chased you have no time to change your shoes. The conventions that are accepted without question in Japan are very different from those accepted in Europe.

I obeyed a European convention myself when a bunch of seven- and eight-year-old boys, who had adopted me as a kind of pet and tried to teach me a little more Japanese, invited me to have a bath with them. This was a compliment which I was not sure I had understood correctly and therefore, I am sorry to say, refused to accept.

The atmosphere in the dining-rooms was loud and informal; you helped yourself to whatever you wanted and you ate it however you liked. Among my self-appointed escorts it was temporarily fashionable to eat spaghetti by hanging it over your nose before you sucked it into your mouth. You sat where you liked, the food was delicious and varied, and meal-times were a pleasure.

The timetable had each day divided into three sections, two in the morning and one in the afternoon. Thursday afternoon was given over to the school meeting, and all there was on the rest of the timetable was Project, Free Choice, Individual Work or Basic Skills. The main projects in progress while I was there were building a big slide down the side of a hill, building a bath-house, making a book about a recent visit to Britain and producing a magazine. More than half the time-tabled time is Project. The projects are not designed by staff to teach particular skills, they are simply practical activities devised and carried out by the people involved. The learning that takes place emerges naturally from the activity; it is not in itself an objective. There is no division by age; young and old work side by side on projects they have chosen themselves.

No one is obliged to take part in either projects or ordinary lessons, but virtually everybody does. However, while a lesson is going on in your classroom, you are at liberty to do something quite different. "Kinokuni is much more fun than my last school," wrote Tatsuma Sugawara, a boy of eight.

"In the classroom of the last school, even if you had finished your work, you still had to sit there. But at Kinokuni you can do anything you like. So I prefer Kinokuni." The level of noise that was happily tolerated would have had many a British teacher shouting for quiet. One of the consequences of this was that when break-time came many children were too busy to notice.

The staff-room seemed to hold at least as many children as adults, and the younger children might well be on people's laps or hanging round their necks.

Lessons end at three or four in the afternoon, supper is at six and bed-times, decided by the school meeting, are at nine and ten. The children sleep in bunk-beds in dormitories of half a dozen.

On my last evening I was invited to join an expedition to pick oranges and persimmons in an orchard some miles away where the school owned a few trees. At last I was able to join in with an activity where language was unimportant, and I was aware of the easy, unorganised efficiency of a group which has a common purpose and no leader. There were only two ladders for about ten people, so most of us picked from the ground, or climbed a little way into the trees. Everyone was busy until only the few highest fruit were left; then the rest of us stood and watched the ladder-climbers until every single fruit had been picked. This seemed to be co-operation without hierarchy, and intuitive awareness of what other people were going to do without clear instructions - the best of East and West combined.

I asked some children to write about why they had come to Kinokuni, and for many of them the main reason had been unhappiness or a sense of failure at their previous schools.

I came to Kinokuni when I was nine so I spent two years in the local school. When I was eight the teacher made the children who had finished their tests go to the library. I was always the last one because I hated maths. One day at a test I didn't understand anything and I was crying. I was still crying in the next lesson and a child who was sitting next to me said "Teacher, what happened to her?" The teacher shouted "You don't need to worry about her!" I thought at that time that I really hated the teacher. Kinokuni is a lot of fun compared to my last school. I've been learning much more at Kinokuni. Also, nobody compares me to any other person. So I'm glad to be at Kinokuni.

Megumi Takahara

Two years ago I stopped going to my local school. That school was not fun at all. I couldn't understand my studies. I thought about not going to primary school but starting again at junior high school. I became backward. Even when I studied at home I was backward. So a few months ago my mother suggested to me that I go to Kinokuni. I was a little worried but I went to the mini-school [a trial period during the holidays when children come for three

days to see whether they like the school]. The first day I went to the dormitory, I went into my room and everybody was talking and chatting very happily. So everybody introduced themselves and I told them my name. Somebody said, "What shall we call you?" Somebody else said, "Is it OK to call you Mikako?" So everybody started calling me Mikako. I really had a good time in the dormitory. I thought maybe only three days was not enough for me to understand Kinokuni but when I was leaving somebody asked me to please come to Kinokuni. I was very glad so I said, yes I will, and they were glad. The reason I am glad to be at Kinokuni is that you can study anywhere you like and the meals are all buffet style. Life in the dormitory is a lot of fun and the school is so different from ordinary schools. Coming to Kinokuni I feel much better than when I stayed at home and didn't go to school. I was glad to be here. Komuten (Project) is fun - they are all laughing, my friends at Kinokuni. I think that Kinokuni friends are much more fun. I hope that there will be more schools like Kinokuni started in Japan.

Mikako Uchiyama

Others gave more positive reasons:

The first reason I chose Kinokuni is because the style of lessons is very different from other schools. You can choose things you really want to learn and when we get together to do something we all have to think. But that is big fun. The second reason is that the meals are good. And the third reason is that the children are all funny there.

Hikaru Tanimoto

I stayed at the local school for two years, then I came to Kinokuni. The difference between those schools is that at the local school we had to do tests and homework. Also, we couldn't do woodwork, which I like, and I hate maths. So every maths test I couldn't understand at all. But at Kinokuni there are no tests and no homework. You can do anything you like. For example, twelve-year-old children can do nine-year-old maths. So I like Kinokuni better. I learned subjects in the local school. But I've been learning many, many other things at Kinokuni.

Kaori Kawaguchi

Since I've been in Kinokuni I've only done project because we built a café and we had a lot of customers. And this year we've been making an onsen [hot spring]. We have birthday parties in the dormitory. At lunchtime we slide down the cliffs. In the winter we make snowmen.

Maia Takino

The café is a wooden building constructed by the students. The school is open to visitors for one day each week, and the café provides lunch for them.

The food is cooked and served by the children. During the week I was there, there must have been fifteen or twenty customers.

A child from my last school said that I was backward about maths - if you stay at a place like Kinokuni you will be stupid. I am a little backward in maths compared to children in ordinary schools but I didn't really want to learn at my last school because even if I don't understand, the teacher just carried on to the next lesson. At Kinokuni you can study until you really understand and also maths is not only study. We learn many, many other things apart from the times when we do maths and Japanese. We can build houses and also we get together to talk at the meetings about a lot of things. So I think Kinokuni children are cleverer than normal school children.

Mai Mizuta

The difference between Kinokuni and other schools is that all different ages of children study in the same room at Kinokuni. I thought it was going to be easy because I can decide things by myself but I found that it is far more difficult than to be told to do everything by the teacher.

Taichi Hamaguchi

Taichi Hamaguchi was twelve when he wrote that. Shotaro Sasakura, who was seven, had different priorities:

Project is a class where we can do digging. We are making a big slide and an onsen at the moment. Now we are having snow at Kinokuni. There are so many insects at Kinokuni. We have dogs at Kinokuni. Their names are Taro, Shiro and Charo.

Shotaro Sasakura

The next school I visited was the Global Free School in Takasago, where I spent only one day. It had six pupils and one full-time and various part-time staff members. All the students there were teenagers, and two of them were boarders. It is an old wooden house in the residential and industrial centre of the town. Although the house is detached, there is no room for any kind of garden or play-space out of doors - in Japanese towns there seldom is.

While I was there we all spent most of our time sitting round one of those low Japanese tables set over a hole in the floor and covered with a liberally padded cloth. When you sit on the edge of the hole and pull the cloth up around yourself you look like a lithe oriental kneeling when you are really a stiff occidental in an ordinary occidental sitting position. There is also a heater suspended under the table, so your feet are kept wonderfully warm, and there is a flat tray on top of the cloth so you have the advantage of a hard surface if you want to write or eat messy food.

This is where we sat for the school meeting. It was Friday, so all those present were invited to sum up their individual weeks. There was a long wait before anybody spoke, and there were long gaps between people's statements. Kazuhiro Kojima, the founder of the school, sat beside me and translated. What struck me at the time was the space left between contributions; another thing that struck me afterwards was the absence of comment on what other people said. I think both are typically Japanese: the long pauses are an expression of mutual respect, giving everyone time to think; the lack of comment is due to an unwillingness to interfere in another person's affairs. The pauses emphasise togetherness, and the lack of comment emphasises respect for other people's privacy. In a European setting such pauses would be more likely to suggest embarrassment, and the lack of comment would suggest indifference. In spite of my western background, I felt welcomed and at ease in this setting.

There are no lessons at the Global School, but every Monday each student plans a timetable of activity for the week. Then every day starts with another meeting at which individual plans are put forward, announcements are made, problems are discussed, feelings expressed and money matters settled. Among the activities for the last week had been Japanese chess, tie-dyeing, learning English, work experience as a hospital secretary, planning a visit to the United States and just enjoying the warmth of the Global School for a last week before moving on.

At the meeting I attended, anyone could ask a general question, and I asked them all why they had come to the Global School. There was the usual long silence, and then Obana-san, the full-time staff member, said that he had been working in a home for disabled children but he had found the institution too rigid. Kazuhiro himself said it was because he wanted to share his understanding of the world. Five of the students answered:

- one had been expelled from his previous school,
- one had left his previous school because he felt like a ship being over-loaded with unnecessary cargo,
- one was looking for a different way of learning which would suit her, and also an opportunity to go to the United States,
- one could not bear the regimentation of the ordinary schools,
- and the fifth had come in order to escape from a dominant elder brother.

For all these, then, the Global School was a refuge, but it was not a refuge from Japanese culture, because of all the schools I visited this seemed to me to be the most distinctively Japanese. However, I felt there was one important un-Japanese feature - none of the people at the Global School seemed to feel it

was necessary to disguise their true feelings in order to make me feel at ease; they made me feel at ease by simply being themselves.

My next visit was to Kuniko Kato at Nonami Children's Village. She was finishing off the school year with three children before starting again in April with, she hoped, fifteen six-year-olds who would then stay with her until they finished their primary education. The school is well-equipped and has a four-room house to itself in a wooded area that belongs to a supportive Buddhist group.

Kato-san's problems were familiar, but must be more difficult to cope with in Japan than they would be in Europe or America. She is, for instance, a feminist, which requires particular strength in a country where on the whole young women who have the advantage of being employed in offices are expected to stand around looking pretty there; once a woman has left work she has little chance of finding a full-time job again; young women are expected to speak in unnaturally high voices, to emphasise their humility and inadequacy. Yet it was with a group of feminists that she founded Nonami.

In *Compulsory Schooling and Human Learning*, (San Francisco, Caddo Gap Press, 1994), edited by Dayle Bethel, she describes how she came to form her philosophy in a way that illustrates all too clearly the way that conventional Japanese, who believe that young children will learn to understand the world on their own, feel differently about children of school age.

When I was younger, I spent a year in Norway studying about children's education. I was deeply impressed by the concern for the needs of weak persons in Norwegian society and the practical provisions made by the society for meeting those needs. Each person in the society was considered to be valuable and of great worth. In Norway I found a society in which the government believed in its citizens and was truly concerned about them.

After returning to Japan, I worked for a few years in a kindergarten and nursery school and began to learn more about the government of my own society. And as I became more aware of the nature of my government, I was amazed by its contrast with the government and society of Norway. Here I found a government which did not believe in or trust its citizens. Here I found a society which pushes 30 or more children in a class with an exhausted, overworked teacher, often a young teacher who has had no experience in work with children at all. It is a society which thinks children will go wrong unless adults train them by cramming them with facts which adults think are important. It is a society which thinks that children must be kept apart from society in walled prisons and subjected to rigid training in right rules and behavior in order for them to become human beings.

As I worked with children every day, I came more and more to a conviction that this approach to children's education is wrong. I discovered that children have a deep natural desire to learn, and they will work hard and long if they are permitted to learn what they want to learn in their own way and at their own pace. But in Japan this natural desire of children to learn is stifled and twisted by our formal education system.

Kato-san visited some alternative schools in the United States, read A. S. Neill's books and visited Summerhill and Kilquhanity, as well as schools in Canada and Scandinavia. The Japanese listen better than the English or the Americans, she says, but they have to be trained to express their own opinions, because this is something they do not want to do. She sees the school meeting as the most important element in her school; it has passed many rules that are similar to those in other schools I have visited, but one important one that I had not seen before - adults are not allowed to touch children's work.

When she first started the school she had a nursery group, but parents took their children away when they reached primary-school age, because they felt that to send their children to an unrecognised school was to risk too much. She has learnt that it is necessary for the school to spend a lot of time trying to educate the parents. Then she took in some children who had had problems at other schools, but she found she did not have the ability to cope with them herself, and professional help was too expensive. In any case, her school was not supposed to be for children with difficulties, it was supposed to be for everyone. Almost every day she has an enquiry for a child with a problem, but now she turns them away.

The only advertisements for the school's methods are the children and Kato-san herself. She is a well-known figure in her area and attracts a hundred people at a time to her meetings about the school. Many parents feel they can trust her, even when she leads their children down unfamiliar paths.

There are a number of small experiments springing up all over Japan, though few of them are as free or as child-centred as Nonami. There was a similar splash of new schools in Europe and America in the sixties, and now in the nineties the movement is virtually world-wide. More and more parents are dissatisfied with what conventional education imposes on their children, but even so there are seldom enough in any one area to make it easy to set up a free alternative. The difficulties that Kuniko Kato is having to cope with are similar to those faced by idealist educators all over the world.

Tokyo Shure, the last school I visited, started in 1985 specifically to offer education to school refusers. The following accounts come from a report by the Nationwide Network of Parents and Citizens on School Refusing:

One morning my mother tried to take me to school by force. I grasped curtain tightly to resist my mother. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe and felt my arms and legs numbed. ... Gradually, I got my arms and legs numbed and couldn't breathe almost every day. However, I kept attending school while taking medicine. Taking medicine, I felt sick and couldn't sleep. I became completely weak. ... I made up my mind not to go to school. However, my family didn't understand me. They took me to hospital once a week.

Kayo Suzuki

It was in the second term of my seventh grade, I started school refusing. The suppressing atmosphere of the school strained me so much that I went to bathroom many times during the class. Or before I left home for school, I got stomach ache, headache and so on. Eventually I started school refusing.

First, I made great effort to go back to school. I went to counsellors and hospitals. Nevertheless, my body didn't work although I tried to go to school very hard. I felt lonely enormously because I reproached myself. I always wept on bed and thought, "I didn't do anything bad, why I have to be suffering from this situation?" At that time my grandfather was the only person who accepted me warmly. It took just a half-minute walk from my house to my grandfather's. One early morning, I couldn't bear loneliness and went to my grandfather's house. Although it was four in the morning, he said "Welcome, Noriaki, welcome," with smile. We made a very big bird cage together. Every time I visited him, he always welcomed me very warmly. His warmth prevented me from my committing suicide.

Noriaki Fujita

Both Kayo and Noriaki found their way to Tokyo Shure.

Unlike the other three schools I have described in this chapter, it was not inspired by any western model, but was a Japanese response to the needs of Japanese children. Nevertheless it has much in common with schools I visited in other countries. The emergence of similar schools from such very different cultures suggests that their shared ideals have universal relevance.

Since Tokyo Shure is a school for school refusers, none of its students are obliged to attend, and some go as seldom as once a month. Others go every day. (Students' written comments about the school have been translated for me by Eriko Fulford.)

There are many things I like at Shure. I joined Shure in January this year.

Shure is open from 10 a.m. But it's all right to go any time, so I feel relaxed. It takes an hour to get to Shure from home, but I don't mind. If you don't want to go, you don't have to.

Besides, times aren't fixed, which is good. If you want to study, do so. If you don't want to, you don't have to.

There is a wide variety of studies. The other day we went fishing during Uchida-san's once-a-month environmental class. The place was Kitaura (near Kasumigaura in the Ibaraki prefecture). I caught twelve fish: various kinds, crucian carp, bluegills, etc. I would like to go fishing again if I could catch so much.

I don't study much but I play football, because I enjoy it at the moment.

Before I was shy in front of people, but I'm more confident now.

We are free to do anything at Shure but if I don't do anything I won't be able to do anything.

Freedom is a big challenge.

Shota Ugaeri

There are now three Shure in Tokyo. At the original school, Tokyo Shure Oji, there are one hundred students on the roll, but usually only forty to sixty actually in the building. The timetable consists entirely of lessons that have been specifically requested, and varies from month to month. When I was there, the subjects offered at the beginning of the month had been calligraphy, water-colour, drawing and comic-drawing, history, psychology, natural sciences, geography, social issues and English, flute, ocarina, accordion, piano and koto (a Japanese stringed instrument), sign language and dance, each for a single session of about an hour. Sign language and psychology had dropped out for lack of takers, but comic-drawing and dance, which I saw briefly, had classes of twenty or more. Six hours in the week were allotted to club activities, that is to say football, choir, drama, ocarina, flute, knitting, photography and basketball. I give these lists in full, partly to show how much of a conventional timetable may turn up when children are invited to study only what interests them, and partly to show how different the balance between subjects is.

I'm twelve years old and in the first year at Junior High School [even though she does not attend]. It was the fifth year at primary school when I stopped going to school, two years ago. I feel I've been a long time at Shure.

Often I am asked by the class teacher about what I am doing and what sort of things are interesting at Shure.

I'm going to tell you what I do and what I like doing.

I don't attend any other lesson except the lunch-time English language conversation. As it's lunch-time some of you might doubt that we could take it in while eating, but I like it as I can do it at my own speed.

I play the flute in the club. I feel a little bit sad because some people who joined the club later than me can play better than me. But I like it.

I take dancing, animation and koto.

I like dancing because there are no unnatural movements. And we are taught the movements thoroughly. I'm mad about dancing.

I like drawing. I draw a cartoon illustration as soon as I have an image in my head. But we can learn the basic skill of drawing, too. I've been playing koto for a year, but it's not so good, as I'm quite slow in learning. I started it after my friend recommended it to me, and I am still not sure what is so good about koto.

However, I enjoy it because the teacher is good. I've been told that I've been going my way. At Shure it's allowed to go our own way, though not at school, and that's why I like it.

Masako Iida

The whole of Tuesday is devoted to activities for which you need a full day - principally excursions of one kind or another, but also pottery. At four o'clock on Monday there is a lecture on a social or environmental issue or a scientific topic. At half past five each day the school is tidied and cleaned by anyone who volunteers to do so, and from six to seven there are classes in basic skills, that is to say science, maths, English, Japanese and social studies, one each day, for the very few children who want to attend. Committee meetings take place on Thursday afternoons, as many of the school activities are run by committees, and the school meeting is on Friday afternoon.

The school is in a well-maintained, modern, five-storey building that was once an office. There is one large room and one very small one on each floor. On the first floor is the staff-room which is full of children, like the staff-room at Kinokuni. From this room the school also runs a home-education programme, another life-line for school refusers.

As well as the hundred students at Tokyo Shure Oji, there are already another seventy at the new branches founded in 1994 and 1995, Tokyo Shure Ota and Tokyo Shure Shinjuku. In spite of the fact that the schools meet a self-evident need, they are not recognised by the ministry of education. However, all the students are registered at the schools they have refused to go to, and automatically get school-leaving certificates when they are fifteen. If they want to go on to a university, though, they have to take exams, and they can prepare for these at Tokyo Shure. Some take a year to do so, and some several years; they are able to work at their own pace.

I spent the best part of two days there. On the first day I was looked after by Kageki Asakura, the English teacher, and on the second by Yukiiji Harada, an old Summerhill student, who visited the school with me. The first lesson I attended was given by two of the students. Keiko Okuchi, the woman who founded the school and is still its head, took part as a pupil, in spite of the fact that there was a television crew downstairs making a film and waiting to interview her. (She was finally called out of the lesson, but she was reluctant to go.) The students had been members of a group that had made a

month-long journey overland to Holland during the summer, and they were talking about the country that had most interested them, which was Poland. They had read up some Polish history, and were passing it on to the half-dozen other interested members of the group who had travelled with them. Of course I understood nothing, but I was able to appreciate the attention, the questioning and the laughter. This was much more like a western seminar than the quiet, gentle meeting at the Global School. The lesson ended with a distribution of leaflets about an Auschwitz exhibition that was on in Tokyo, and a joint decision that their next lesson should be devoted to a discussion of the differences between socialism and communism.

There were plenty of children in the building who were not in lessons. They were talking, playing music, playing computer games, reading. On the school meeting afternoon, Yukiji, my Summerhill interpreter, asked a group sitting chatting on the stairs whether they had come in specifically for the meeting, and they seemed surprised to be asked; no, they told her, they weren't going to the meeting at all.

Yukiji and I did attend the meeting, with about thirty students and Kageki and Keiko-san. We heard a wide range of decisions, requests and announcements:

- It was agreed to have a white-board to display the options every day.
- Help was requested with the Auschwitz exhibition.
- There was a report on a protest about French nuclear testing.
- It was agreed to have a Christmas party.
- Times of piano lessons were discussed.
- There was an announcement about a production of a play by someone who had never been to school.
- Permission was granted for a group of lawyers to visit Shure.
- There was a plea for people to take more care of the synthesiser.
- Permission was granted for a TV team to come and interview people about bullying.
- A new art course was announced.

I quote the whole list of topics, not because it surprised me but because it seems so familiar.

After the meeting, Yukiji and I sat and talked with a group of the older students. I had been struck by the fact that although all these young people had been sufficiently rebellious to refuse to go to school at all, they should now be so responsible, serious and relaxed. There was no feeling of being among a group of social outlaws. It was too complex a question to be answered in a short conversation in which every observation had to be translated, so to simplify it I found myself asking "Why does nobody swear?"

The first response, which took me aback because it simply hadn't occurred to me, was "How do you know we don't swear?" How did I know? I could only suggest that it was because of the general sound of the conversations that I heard. They agreed that in fact they didn't swear. My next surprise was the reason. Apparently you can't swear in Japanese because there are no swearwords.

This was a symbolic answer to the question I had tried to ask about rebellious behaviour. Perhaps young people like those I met can't behave rebelliously because there is no acceptable pattern to follow. Rebellious teenagers of the type you see in Europe exist, but they have dropped out of society to the point of becoming virtually invisible. In my whole two weeks in Japan, the only slightly conspicuous rebel I met was the boy at the Global School who was there because his previous school had expelled him. He smoked in the street, which was risky because it is against the law to smoke in Japan until you are twenty, and he wore a large safety-pin as an ear-ring.

I expect I was simply too culturally blind to recognise other signs of rebellion. Yukiji, for instance, who dressed, it seemed to me, like a smart city woman of any age, told me that her clothes were generally thought to be too young for her, and also that she was considered eccentric because she was prepared to discuss personal problems with her close friends.

Although it is enjoyable to be at Shure, it is not easy to turn your back on conventional education.

I left Shure in March and rejoined in October in the same year. The reason I left Shure was that I began to worry whether it would be all right for me to spend my time playing as I was about to become a high school student. I wondered every day if I would be able to find a proper job if I was thrown into society without having done any serious study, what my life style would be in ten years time, whether I could lead a normal life without going to a normal school.

Going to high school means changing school and I thought it was a good chance for me to get back to school.

...

The first few months I spent my time without any problems, but as time passed I started to wonder if what I was studying would be useful or not when I came into society.

For example, even if I could read and understand ancient Japanese literature I don't think it is of any use. Even if we remembered chemical formulae, opportunities to use them would be nil. English would be useful and the likelihood of using it would be quite high, but as long as we live in Japan, we can do without it. Art is within, a kind of hobby.

My thoughts at that time might have been wrong but it was enough to keep my interests away from my studies.

When I started to think like that, I lost interest in studying and I started to stop going to school. And I remembered about Shure and went there. There were the same people as before, though some had left. This made it easy to fit back into the school.

I rejoined Shure in October in order to find out what I wanted to do at the same time as attending a crammer.

Aoki Hiryu

All the quotations from students I have used come from a book published to celebrate Shure's tenth anniversary. Naturally most of the comments are favourable. Nevertheless, the book also includes the piece from which the following extracts are taken.

I came to Shure when I was at the end of the sixth year at primary school. The reason why I didn't go to school was I didn't like the teacher and the school itself. That is, when we are at school, we have to do what others do, and I feel children who do well have been favoured by the teacher. That's why I didn't like the school.

I came to know about Shure because my parents knew about it. I started to avoid school when I was in the fourth year. Although I went to school some of the time, I didn't like it.

Then when I came to Shure I thought it was fun. I thought I should have come here when I was in the fourth year.

My first impression was that people vary a lot. My current impression is different from that. Rather than individualism, I feel more in groups.

Anyway, what I do now is practise in a band for the 10th anniversary!

Also I play football and I have set up a football club, therefore I am the captain.

...

I think the present Shure has changed compared to how it was before. We have changed Shure.

Some say the present Shure is good, but I don't think I do. I think we should change it more.

Naru Kurokawa

It takes a good deal of self-confidence for students in any school to announce that they have changed it, and that they want to change it further. It certainly never struck me that I might be able to change my schools, and I did not feel I could change the conventional schools I taught in even as a member of staff. If the thought ever had occurred to me, it would certainly never have been allowed to appear in a book celebrating the history of the school. And that was in England, and this is in Japan.

John Potter, my principal source of information about Japan, sometimes interviews musicians for an English-language magazine. He was interested in

a group of four sisters who have sung folk-songs together for many years. He asked one of them whether there was ever any disagreement about what they should sing. "How could there be any disagreement?" he was asked, "I am the eldest."

Tokyo Shure has achieved really astonishing changes.

13 The Democratic School of Hadera

I first visited Hadera in June 1993, with a small group of people who had just attended a rather academic international conference in Jerusalem, entitled "Education for Democracy in a Multi-Cultural Society." I was looking forward to seeing education for democracy in an actual school, but when I was first taken to the school by Yaira Golan, the teacher in whose house I was staying, I did not know what to expect.

We drove past a high metal fence, behind which a crowd of large adolescent boys loitered threateningly. As my visit was to last for several days I felt rather anxious. To my relief we didn't stop. Yaira drove on for a few hundred yards till the tarmac ended. We stopped by a wood at the top of a gradual slope, overlooking agricultural land. The only fence nearby was falling down. We stepped through a gap in the fence and found ourselves in an open sandy space surrounded by a loose circle of caravans and one-story buildings. Children of all ages were there, running, playing football or more private games, walking, sitting, talking; the younger ones were full of energy and urgency. Everyone seemed friendly, and almost everyone spoke English.

Hadera, founded in 1987, is a state school with 350 pupils. Although it is a state school, parents have to pay fees of about £600 a year to cover its additional costs. Nevertheless, for every free place there are uncountable applications - uncountable because after a certain point the waiting-list is closed; at a preliminary interview the school makes sure that the applicants and their parents know what they are applying for, and after taking into account such issues as where the family lives, and whether brothers or sisters already attend the school, selection is by lottery.

Trainee teachers are sent to the school to learn. In 1995 it won an award from the Ministry of Education for being among the ten most interesting schools in Israel. Yakov Hecht, founder and head of the school, has been appointed by the Ministry of Education to supervise the democratisation of other state schools. Several new schools on the Hadera model have already opened.

There are two main differences between Hadera and most of the other schools in this book. The first is that it has strong government support. This support is even expressed in financial terms, as it receives more money per pupil than the ordinary conventional school. The second is the school's extraordinary, open argumentativeness. Nothing is sacred; nothing is settled; everything is under discussion.

Even the school's prospectus is provocative. This is how it begins:

\

Can a school be democratic?
Can an outlook which declares its faith in ...
 freedom of choice
 freedom of thought, conscience and religion
 freedom of opinion and expression
... work within the framework of "school"?

And on the first page it also says this:

Traditional schools are based upon the idea that the student has to do what the adult-teacher requires him/her to do; in other words, education based on obedience. A good student is one who does precisely what he is told to do. An outstanding student is one who does what he is told in a manner superior to others. Which means, in short, he/she excels in obedience.

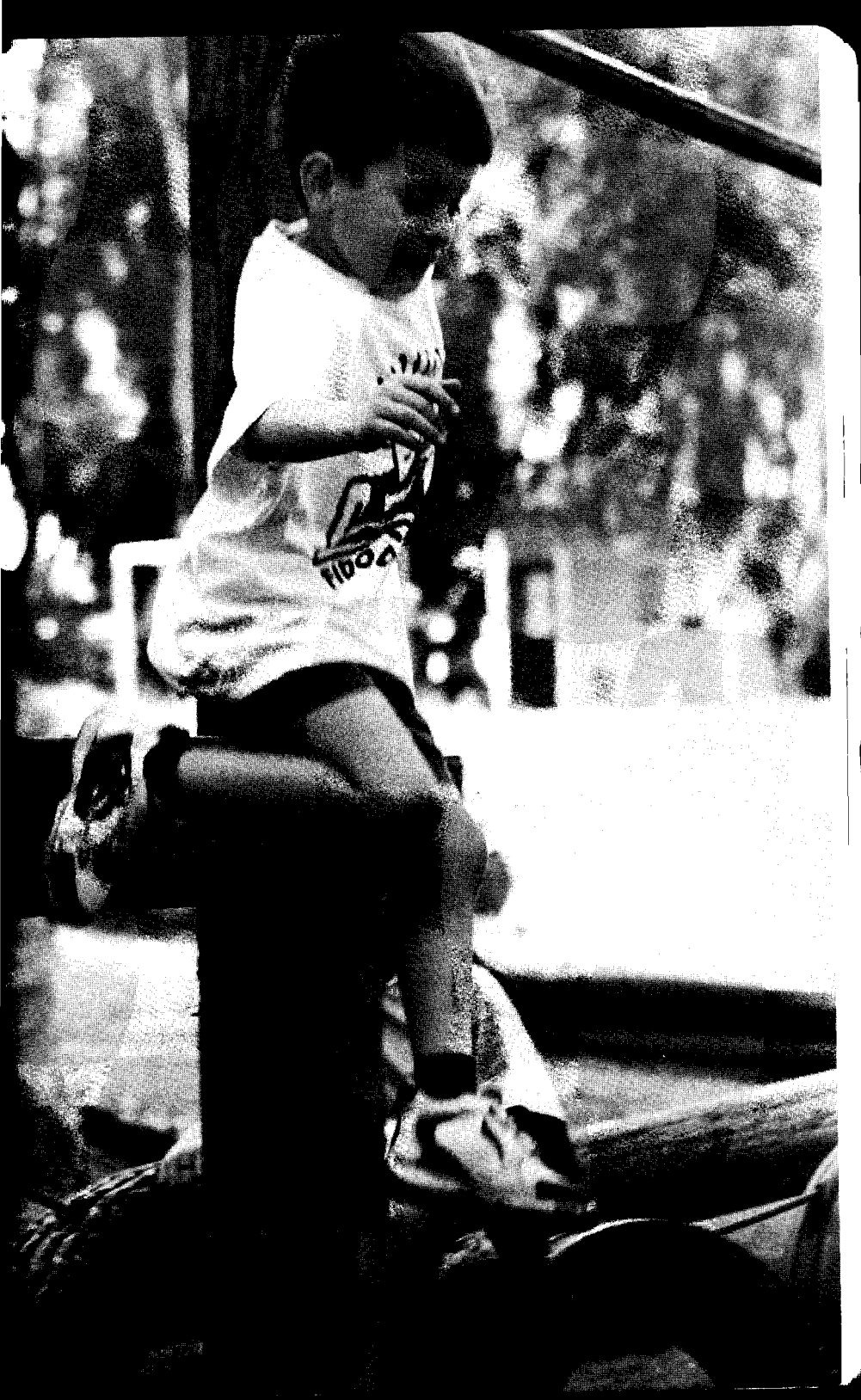
The next two pages give details about the parliament, the judicial authority and so on, and then the question of learning is dealt with.

At the Democratic School, the student, from an early age, turns the standard question of "What does the teacher want from me?" around by asking ...
What are my plans?
What are my goals?

The system for helping people to reach those goals, as described in the prospectus, is fourfold. Firstly, there is a timetable of formal lessons available. Secondly, students can negotiate courses of their own with the appropriate teachers. Thirdly, a number of subject rooms are open all day as study centres where you can drop in when it suits you. And fourthly, it is possible, by arrangement with your tutor, to work outside the school with local professionals, at other institutions or indeed entirely independently.

The next page of the prospectus launches into polemic again:

Let's play "What if" for a moment ...
What if the reality of education was different ...
And all the schools were democratic!
And all the countries were run by dictators!
... Then they would say - democracy works well in the context of small groups of say, one hundred people, but it can't work well with countries with millions of citizens.
... Then they would say - democracy suits schools that deal with matters concerning students. But it would be irresponsible to let ignorant and uneducated people decide the fate of a country and matters of life and death.



... Then they would say - democracy works well in theory but heaven forbid that a university professor should be on equal footing with someone who can't read or write!

... Then they would say - do you really believe that the millions of citizens will understand the laws and remember them? That everyone will understand the underlying principles of democracy? Only intellectuals are capable of doing this!

... Then they would say - if everyone chooses their own profession no one will be interested in doing the dirty, hard work. The country will fall apart!

... Then they would say - if everyone chooses where they want to live, where to build, how to drive, and all the newspapers print what they see fit, there will be total anarchy!

... Then they would say - democracy is suitable for a school where everything is "small", but in the harsh reality of the real world it won't work.

In practice, the fourfold system for helping people to achieve their goals is fivefold: the fifth opportunity available is to spend time meeting friends, chatting with staff, playing games, dreaming, finding out about yourself and other people on an entirely informal basis. Visitors sitting in the school yard have the impression that that is what most people do all the time, but that is only because those taking advantage of other opportunities are hidden from view.

During my first visit to the school, one of my strongest impressions was the vigour and urgency of the activity among the younger children. You can come to the school when you are four. Lessons are voluntary throughout the school, but in the kindergarten, where you will probably spend most of your time until you are eight, there aren't even any classes available. These children were not wasting any time sitting at tables waiting for lessons to begin, or waiting for teachers to help them; they seemed to have more to do than they could fit into the time available. During my second visit I had my attention drawn to the difference between "doing" and "being active". The illustration I was given was to do with using a screwdriver. When a teacher shows you how to fit a screwdriver into the slot in the top of the screw and drive the screw home you learn a skill ("doing"), but when you decide for yourself that you want to fix two pieces of wood together and find out for yourself how to do it, you also understand the purpose of the skill and the mechanism by which it works ("being active"). The young children at Hadera were not simply "doing", they were definitely "being active".

School in Israel only takes place in the mornings; at Hadera the morning ends at one, the buses leave and the school seems to become empty.

One of the pleasures of my first visit was a production of *Everyman* in Hebrew. The dress rehearsal went on until late into the night. The lighting was done by students, and they had the unquestionable authority of lighting

people at all dress rehearsals; the director, who was the drama teacher, was in their hands. I very much enjoyed the production, even though I couldn't understand a word; it was lively, varied and well-rehearsed. The director had kept a firm grip on her cast; a democratic education does not mean a sloppy performance.

Big drama productions illustrate a difference between conventional schools and places like Hadera. If the only people in a play are those who want to be in it, then the necessity for co-operation imposes a natural discipline that everyone accepts. In a school where teachers are used to dominating, they dare not rely on this natural discipline, but feel they have to take control themselves. This has its strongest effect on the weaker actors, who no longer try to find out how best to play their roles, but only try to do what they have been told to do. The result can be stilted and nervous, and, though success is as joyful as theatrical successes always are, failure is enormously more humiliating. If things go wrong, these children will suffer the bitter shame of having been forced to make fools of themselves by doing something they did not understand.

A similar situation is created in many conventional classrooms, where children may deliberately be made to feel stupid. Often they end up trying to be like the threatening figures lurking in the first school playground I saw in Israel, in order to conceal their imagined stupidity behind a mask of toughness.

In 1994 a group of Hadera students attended a democratic schools conference at Sands School in England. A British head teacher finished a description of his school by declaring that he himself took responsibility for all major decisions. When Noa Ben Shalom, one of the Hadera students, asked, politely but directly, "Who gave you the authority?", he was too surprised to find any reply. Here was a teacher who had been doing what was expected of him, acting his part, who had suddenly found that he did not know his lines.

In ordinary life, Hadera students do not need to know their lines, because they have no need to act. In plays they do need to know their lines, not because someone has told them they do, but because it is self-evidently essential. By the removal of the screen of adult authority, they have been brought more closely into contact with reality. This is an example of the natural authenticity of experience that occurs when adults do not stand in the way.

When I next visited Hadera, in 1996, the conflict that struck me most was not that between imposed discipline and the discipline of reality, but another one to which my attention was drawn by Yoad Eliaz, a former teacher at the school who still had a close connection with it. This was the conflict between

Utopians and realists - a conflict that probably exists in some form in every school in this book.

The atmosphere in the school was as delightful as ever, but there were a number of changes. There was now an effective fence around the school, and an armed guard at the front entrance - a legal requirement for protection from terrorists - but the back gate was guarded only by a student sitting on a nearby bench, working or chatting with friends. There was a new drama building, and a science block of four rooms that had only just been completed. In the library there were a dozen computers that had just been connected to the Internet, and each one was being used by a group of two or three people. The yard had been optimistically grassed over, and was already showing signs of wear at the end of April, before the heat of the summer had started. All the four teachers who had been working with the youngest children when I first arrived had moved on to different roles - one to start his own school, and two to work with older children in the school. The fourth, Yoad Eliaz, the man who drew my attention to the Utopian/realist conflict, was introducing the school to teachers from non-democratic schools who were sent to Hadera as part of their training, and at the same time taking a course in psychotherapy. One of the new teachers in the kindergarten was Omri Geten, who had been teaching geography three years before. Such changes show flexibility, prosperity, modernity or political necessity, but they do not affect the essence of the school. The realists are gratified and the Utopians are indifferent (though the biology teacher seemed to hope that the science block would prove to be a white elephant; he did not want students to be attracted to his subject by the glamour of the facilities).

Perhaps the most important remaining Utopian/realist difference was between those who set store by the "bagrut" (the national school-leaving exam) and those who regarded it as an irrelevance. In some other major disagreements the Utopians had already won. After the teacher leading an expedition to the desert had caused a furore by insisting on imposing a minimum age for participation, age discrimination had been finally ruled out. The idea that all children have to have lessons if they are to learn to read and write had been shown by experience to be false. The problem of the bagrut remained.

If you start your school career at Hadera, you will probably spend most of your time during your first three or four years in the area created for your age-group, where there are adults whose particular concern is to look after you, where there are dressing-up clothes, art materials, junk, toys and games, and where you can feel secure. The principle of no age-discrimination means that you are allowed to go wherever you want in the school grounds, but it has more effect in the opposite direction. There are always several older children busy with the little ones, or helping Omri with some new construction. Omri,

curiously enough, is the very geography teacher who did not want to take small children into the desert.

Asaf Lester, a musician who was one of the first pupils at the school when it started and he was seven years old, described to me how things had changed since then.

Asaf: In the beginning of the school we had to learn some things, like maths, the bible, reading and writing. I think that was the three subjects we needed to learn, maybe afterwards also English, but when the school developed and with time, people saw that it's not necessary and it had no point forcing people. I don't remember it, actually, I just know that it was like that.

Me: And what about your brother [who started in the school at the age of four]?

Asaf: No, they didn't force him, he just - well, it was pretty surprising, actually. You don't really understand how they do it, they just - one day they start to get the paper and things, you don't - you don't really understand how they do it, the little ones, they just take in things and it's not obvious how exactly, but they're doing it, they start to read. Like if you teach them - well it depends, my brother was like that, it depends, it can be harder for some and less for others. But I think he had a sense for it because also English he just started to read one day, which also was not exactly obvious how he started doing it, but he started doing it and well ... Actually you have to see it, but in the kindergarten, it's amazing. They go in there with their writing books and they're so glad to learn, it's amazing, I can't even - they just - they force the adults to teach them, they so like it. After they do a page or they finish a book they go in all the school with the book - "Aaaah! I finished it. Aaaah! Do you want to hear what I know?" It's coming from themselves I think, with some of them. There are also people that have a problem with that and that, then it's more difficult. But no one is forced in here, and even they are glad to learn, they like it, I can't explain, they like to learn it. They like to learn reading and writing and it's so fun for them, it's like a game. It is a game. The letters. It's very nice.

Learning to read by yourself can have surprising results. Yaira's daughter Noga actually taught herself to read English upside down so that she could turn the pages in the ordinary Hebrew way and read in the ordinary Hebrew direction, from right to left, only starting at the bottom of the page instead of the top. (She can read English the right way up as well.)

The timetable is a rich one, but there were idealists on the staff who disliked it. Doug Calem, the American teacher of English who translated it for me, said he wished it didn't exist, so that he only had to teach children who came to him and asked to be taught. Yaira said it gave parents the opportunity to nag at their children to do things they would not do naturally.

Varda Yaari, another teacher of English, said that for too many children the timetable represented what they ought to do, and prevented them from thinking what they actually wanted to do.

A single day's timetable is enough to illustrate Varda's point, and to suggest also that, when there are so many organised opportunities, students might think it was not worth bothering to ask for their own personal programme. If you were a student at the school, how would you fill your own time on a day like this?

8.30 - 9.10	
	Beginners' Photography
	Advanced French
	Arabic
	Archaeology
	Hebrew centre open
	English 7
	Art centre open
9.15 - 9.55	
	Photography
	Very advanced French
	Popular Literature
	Beginners' movement
	Boys' beginners P.E.
	Hebrew centre open
	Archaeology
	Maths centre open
	English 7
	Art centre open
	English bagrut
	Arabic
10 - 10.45	
	Break
10.45 - 11.25	
	Sculpture
	Maths centre open
	Creative writing for young people

	P.E. for middle school
	English 9th to 10th grade
	Arabic
	Mechanics workshop
	Advanced photography
	Art centre open
	Group projects for movement and drama
11.30 - 12.30	
	Sculpture
	Hebrew centre open
	Mechanics Workshop
	Art centre open
	Arabic
	Photography
	French for bagrut
	Holocaust literature
	Creative writing
12.15 - 12.55	
	Creative writing
	Art centre open
	Advanced photography
	Holocaust literature
	Arabic
	Maths centre open
	Individual English
	Maths for 3-point bagrut (an easier level than 5-point bagrut)

I cannot examine this timetable without feeling that I would want to fill my day completely, and indeed that I would resent some of the clashes, yet there are children at the school who choose to do few organised lessons, or none at all; they may just talk, smoke, play table-tennis and basketball and yet still gain a great deal from it. Somehow, for instance, they all seem to learn to speak English. Here are some students' comments about use of time:

Shiraz Grinboam: My first years were a hang-time. I was spending a lot of time with my friends. We had a very strong group of people from all kinds of ages and places around the country that came here. The school was smaller

and we had a lot of time just to wander around. I studied only literature in those two years and after that the bagrut came and then I started understanding how much I should have prepared myself, because there was a lot of stuff that I didn't know how to do, like preparing for exams and making papers. I was stunned, like, I was "Wow, what's that?", and I overcame it and this year I am studying almost by myself, for all the exams, and I think it's like I learned a lot of responsibility and discipline in achieving my own goals and that is a very good thing because I see it with a lot of other people, that they have less sense of responsibility because they were over-schooled what to do.

Me: So what are you studying now?

Shiraz: Now I am studying for five exams, in English, History of Art, the history of the Jewish people and composition. And the Bible.

Me: And you're learning the cello.

Shiraz: Yes. And I do dance.

Me: Do you dance here in the school?

Shiraz: We have a brilliant teacher here. But I learn the cello outside the school. ... Those two years were a good thing. It was like growing up. I had a lot of time to think.

Me: On most days, do you have at least two classes, or do you sometimes have none?

Shy Tavorl: Oh, most days I have more than two classes, I mean like four, five.

Me: And do you like having your time filled with classes? Or would you rather have more time to yourself.

Shy: Sometimes it's good, and sometimes I want to be outside in the yard, so I say OK, so today I won't go to art class. When I don't go to classes it's not, really the important ones, like mathematics, you know, so art because I'm just painting there, I could do the same thing in home in my house, so when I want to be outside, I just miss art.

Me: Are there lots of things you want to do outside the classroom?

Shy: Not lots of things, just hang around with my friends and things, really that's it.

...

Shy: Yes, I mean there are people that almost all of the day are just outside in the yard, so I learn more than them, but there are - it's not easy to say, but there are a few people that are all the time in class. And I am somewhere in the middle, maybe even more on the side of the people which is in the classes all the time.

Me: What do the people that are in the yard all the time do?

Shy: Just playing and things. I mean Yakov, the headmaster, says that when you are in the yard you learn too, so I am trying to say it to my mother all the time, but she doesn't accept it.

...

Me: One of the older students I have talked to said there ought to be more pressure to go to classes, that the people who are hanging out in the yard ought to be persuaded to go to lessons. Do you think that's true?

Shy: I don't think that there's supposed to be more pressure, because that's the idea of a democratic school, that there's no pressure, and I think that if you want to go to the class you go to the class. If you don't want to go to the class you don't go to the class. I usually want to go to the classes, that's the reason that I go to the classes. The reason that I want to go to the class is because I am the one that has wanted these classes. I mean in two years, three years, no, two years, I didn't learn mathematics at all, and then I saw that I really have a hole in my education, so I started learning math and now I learn math more than students in our normal schools.

The apparent irreconcilability of the timetable of 40-minute lessons and the busy but relaxed social atmosphere outside the classrooms perplexed me. There are no bells at the school, and no prominent school clock. If you are going to get to your lessons punctually you have to be able to consult a watch - your own or someone else's. When I was interviewing children, they often asked me what the time was, because of impending lessons. Towards the end of my visit I asked Miriam Bernstein about this.

Me: I've just been sitting watching people coming into school and nobody seems to be going anywhere, they just seem to be wandering about, but are some people doing things?

Miriam: Yes, there are some people doing things. Not many. But even wandering around and talking and smoking at the tree, as Yakov says it's learning, and so everybody learns in his own way, you see?

Me: I'm very perplexed by how anybody - if somebody has chosen to do, I don't know, geology or something - they just know when to go, somehow, by magic it looks like.

Miriam: No, we get this timetable at the beginning of the year and you choose what you want to do every hour. You've got many options, and you choose and after you choose you just work with your timetable the whole year and you know that at half past nine there is an art lesson or something like that, and you go there.

Me: And you don't have difficulty, doing that?

Miriam: Ah, yes you do. Of course you do have difficulty. I have difficulty because it's much more fun to stay and sit around and talk and have conversations but at some point you force yourself, you have to do it.

Me: Why do you have to do it?

Miriam: Because if you don't - I have to do it. Because if I don't do it I will feel like I am wasting my time. And sometimes I - it's very very difficult and I get very frustrated because of that, because I don't want to learn maths so badly, but at some point I do and nobody helps me, like it's very difficult

because you don't have the teachers who say "You must go to maths lesson", and at some point I want them to tell me but there is no one who will tell me that, so you're on your own and you need to make your own decision and to work with the results of your decision, so it's difficult.

Asaf Lester told me that he had found it difficult to go to the school parliament, too.

Me: Do you go, sometimes?

Asaf: Well, I am going sometimes, when I have the strength, the power for it, because there it's not so easy, they talk a lot. Sometimes it's hard in school to pick yourself up from what you are doing and maybe the peace that there is in here and the flowing of things, to get out of the flow and just pick yourself up and go to the parliament and just switch off and do something else. So I do it sometimes. I go to the parliament. At the beginning of the year I hardly went. I just went when it was very important, but now I am going almost every time in the last four months.

Me: When you said that when you are just going with the swing of things it is difficult to break off, what about when you have a lesson? Geology, or something?

Asaf: Well, sometimes it's in your flow, you know, in your flow, the lessons, it's in your system. Mostly the ones that you like, of course. You even expect them and you even wait and you look forward to go to the lesson that you like. Which happens here. And there is just lessons that you have to pick yourself up. And there is time that you want very much just to pick yourself up, never mind what, from this - I don't know how you call it, in Hebrew we have a word for it, it's called stalbet. When you're sitting in stalbet, when you're just sitting and talking and you know, just being, sometimes you want very hard to get out of it, from this peace-ness, I don't know, just that you are full of it totally and then you are very happy to go to places and do things.

Ori Schwart is about to leave the school, and I asked him whether he felt he had missed any opportunities by spending nine years at the school.

Ori: Definitely not. I can express myself here in the most unequivocal terms. I learn for the bagrut exams and can develop my artistic talents. The opportunity in the school is very good, much better than in other places. We have a lot of intellectual debates about our government and we have no violence. There is much violence in other places because Israel is a very military place. And so I think that at the school I can achieve whatever I want to. ... After all, after all the fun and that, I achieved very good bagrut results. My marks are pretty good.

Me: What did you take?

Ori: All the duty exams that I must take, history of the 20th century in Europe, history of the Jewish people, literature, English, maths, Hebrew grammar. 60 to 70 per cent of us take the bagrut.

Ori told me he also took extra courses for enjoyment, such as philosophy and yoga, and others for self-expression, particularly playing a lot of music including renaissance recorder music. On my last day I played the piano for a brief jam session with four of the school jazz musicians, and Ori not only played a swinging and tuneful blues but managed to make himself heard against piano, drums and saxophone when he was playing the tenor recorder - something I wouldn't have thought possible. He was a realist about the bagrut, but he regretted that the school had so much the character of what he called "a supermarket of knowledge," and, in the true Utopian tradition, longed for it to have more of a sense of community. Too many people at the school, he felt, were just out to get what they wanted from it.

Ori: Now I have finished what I can do at the school and next year I want to be here, but if the school were something more than an instrument I would stay here. You know I love the school, I will be here next year a lot. I guess that every week I will come to visit. I like even the place, the pine-trees here.

In theory, the democratic system of the school is more important than its timetable, though the fact that the timetable is a programme of choices rather than requirements is an essential element of the school for everyone. Yoad Eliasz commented that the school parliament matters a lot and a little in the same way as a national parliament - only a few people are actively involved, but its existence matters to almost everybody. Yakov Hecht said that democratic schools were the exact opposite of Steiner schools, because Steiner believed that he knew the truth; if you know the truth, why should you bother with democracy?

Few of the children I spoke to had much to say about the parliament itself. Asaf described it like this:

Asaf: This is a very hard and complicated subject which I can tell you what's going in the area and I can tell you what people think and what I think. Well, what is happening now, we have a parliament each week, like one hour, an hour and a half and there is subject that people bring - they need to say it first to the head, the chairman. You need to say it before, and there is a list of waiting because there is always things, always, so then there is a parliament committee and they are responsible to put a notice in the school about what is going to be and then people can choose to come or not to come - it depends what the people talk about, what subject. Usually there are about thirty people in the parliament, of which at least five, maybe more, five, six,

seven, is teachers. There is at least fifteen people that come regularly, they come every time never mind what you talk about, fifteen people that come anyway. And there is a lot of people that never come to the parliament.

Asaf did not mention the fact that parents also have a right to participate in the parliament. Nor did anyone else that I spoke to. The parents' role in the government of the school seems to be negligible.

Among the students I spoke to, Miriam was the one with most to say about the system of government, and she was critical.

Miriam: My complaints begin with we're not trusted enough and students don't come to the parliament because they think they don't have enough power and basically nothing is changed because the students are sitting passive doing nothing for the school. Like we have committees for everything and the power of the committees is run by the teachers, so basically I don't feel we have really power of doing things in the school and in the end and at the top it is Yakov and the staff who decide what is going to happen, because the teachers do have a place where they can talk about the school but we don't have any time in the whole week of, like, conversation with the teachers about what's happening. We don't have it. It's like only the parliament which you can't bring personal issues, only make rules, so it's a problem. Yeah, there is lots of problems in the school, but with the problems, I am choosing to stay here. It has its problems and we're working to change it and it's really hard work, but I believe, I hope, I could change it.

Me: How are you working to change it?

Miriam: Like from this conference [an international conference of democratic schools held the previous week] - I want to pass a rule in the parliament that we won't have an accepting committee of teachers, but the meeting will decide if we hire or fire and I want - it's like rules that I want to pass, and I want to make in the timetable a free time for everyone who can talk about the school, you see, like in the WUK school in Austria they have these chat groups which we don't have and I think it's very important for our school to have this kind of stuff, and now I'm going to work on that. I'm going to want to have it.

Me: Why do you want to stay in spite of your objections?

Miriam: Why do I want to stay here? Because the other things are worse than this. I don't have any options, really, because the schools in Israel are very very very bad. And here we have - maybe we have the illusion that somebody listens to us, but even so we - I'm not sure. If all the students would believe in themselves we could change stuff. The problem is they don't believe - the students here don't believe in themselves, but we're going to work on it, and in the end it will be good. Hopefully.

Me: So is part of the reason for liking the school that you think you will be able to change it? An ordinary school you could never change, but this school you think you will be able to change?

Miriam: Yeah. I want to hope so, yeah.

The school noticeboard gave a useful indication of the degree to which the children are trusted, and are able to control the government of the school. In view of Miriam's criticisms, it is surprisingly Utopian. This is what it displayed:

- a list where you had to tick yourself off when you came into school.
- an announcement of an afternoon history lecture, with great emphasis on the fact that it was not to be an ordinary lesson.
- an announcement that a teacher was away, and how his absence was to be dealt with.
- a proposal to take an advertisement in a national paper, stating the school's opposition to the Israeli air strikes on Lebanon that were taking place at the time.
- a few advertisements for events outside the school.
- the timetable.
- the revised rules for the judicial system, redefining the roles of the judicial committee and the appeal committee: the judicial committee can punish people to the extent of excluding them from the school either temporarily or permanently, and the appeals committee can reverse school parliament decisions if they go against human rights.
- the decisions of the Music Room Committee, including the following:
 1. There will be one responsible person for each day of the week. All these people will have keys.
 2. You may not eat, smoke, act violently or damage equipment. If you do, the automatic punishment is exclusion from the music room for a month, and having to pay for what you have damaged.
 3. If you want to use the room, you make arrangements with the person responsible for the day.
 4. If you fail to leave the room tidy when you have finished, you are automatically excluded for a week.
 5. On one particular day two committee members undertake a partial tidying, and on another day two other members undertake a complete tidying.
- The timetable for the bagrut exams.
- The announcement of the loss of a ring.
- A request from the Staff Committee (not a committee of teachers, but the committee that appoints, disciplines and dismisses teachers) that any complaints should be sent in by a certain date.

- A letter from the Arabs of Arara expressing sympathy at the time of the terrorist bus bombs.
- Two proposals due to be discussed in the parliament:
 1. that a private investigator should be hired for a fee of 5000 shekels to investigate a major theft within the school, and that the thief should be expelled without right of appeal.
 2. that it should be permissible to raise personal issues in parliament (but only if those involved want it themselves).
- A student's announcement of the formation of a group to watch films and discuss them, with a space for those interested people to sign down.
- A list of staff responsibilities, such as ordering stationery, making arrangements for trips, sorting out the timetable etc.
- A request for volunteers to "guard" the back gate for a fee of 10 shekels a day.

The above list contains two references to committees: the Music Room Committee and the Staff Committee. Among the other committees in the school are the Justice Committee, the Lavatory Committee, the Admissions Committee, the Celebrations Committee, the Finance Committee, the Library Committee and the Computer Committee. Appointment to the committees is by election at the beginning of the year. Both the committees and the parliament make rules, but when I asked for a list of rules no one could find one. When you arrive in the school you find out what they are by imitation and hearsay.

One day I was fetched to attend a meeting of the Justice Committee, because they had heard I would be interested. On this particular occasion the meeting was chaired by a teacher, and there were three judges present, of whom the two youngest appeared to be perhaps twelve and nine. The complaint to be dealt with was from an eight-year-old girl, who said that a boy of her own age had taken money from her, and when she got it back had "strangled" her. Plaintiff, witnesses and judges were all present, but the accused could not be found. When eventually he turned up, claiming ignorance of the hearing, the plaintiff and her friends had already left. The trial was adjourned to another day, so that the accused could hear the case against him. The teacher was called away by a group of young children who wanted to have a story read to them. The blend of formality and informality seemed gentle and appropriate, but I was told that the boy concerned was always getting into trouble for fighting, and it was uncertain that the school would be willing to keep him for much longer. In spite of its informal appearance, the Justice Committee apparently had a great deal of power and responsibility.

For the staff, the organisation of the school is extremely important, and they are always trying to improve it. The battles between the realists and the

Utopians continue. Yet it seems to me that what matters most to the students is neither the system of government, however open it may be, nor the timetable, however rich it may be, but simply the social atmosphere. I quote again from my interviewees.

Me: One of the staff I talked to said that what the students most valued about the school was being free. Does that mean anything to you?

Miriam: Being free? I don't know. I think a free person can be anywhere. A free person - I think a free person is a person who if he has a problem can think of many possibilities to solve it, not only one: that's a free person. I don't think a free person is the one who can choose to go or not to go to a maths lesson.

Me: There must be more that you like about the school than just that you might be able to change it. What else do you like about it?

Miriam: I like my friends, the social - in the school - the social relationship is what's really - I have some of the teachers that I really like and I have really good contact with them. And I, like, you know, see [pointing to the scene in the yard], you can see here, it's like everything is peaceful, it's like it's none of the stress, even if there is, you can work on it, you can solve it.

Me: What have you done here that you couldn't have done in other places?

Asaf: Thinking about what I am doing, if what I am doing is right or wrong, what really interesting me, what sort of things are really interesting me, and I think that if I could be - if it was different maybe - I would not get a connection with the adults which is important thing I think. To get connection with adult people ...

When students leave the school, the first thing they have to do is to go into the army. Noa Ben Shalom wrote this about her experience.

Many people who discuss open and democratic education say that it gives its students the tools for learning. From my experience there is more to that than just how to read a history book (without any disrespect to history books).

I cannot explain what it was exactly in school that gave me strength, but whatever it may be I know it made me strong.

The fact that the school was based on democracy opened my mind.

I still have a long way to go. Yet I think that now I can probably avoid some of the traps which a lot of people my age fall into quite easily.

At the risk of appearing pretentious, I feel I have the basic tools for thinking. For example, in Israel when you finish High School you go to serve in the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces); women serve for one year and nine months and men serve for three years. Many people asked me whether I wouldn't find it more difficult because of my open and democratic education. Now, two months after completing my service and looking back I can still not

say that I am happy to have done it, but I am pleased with the way I have done it, and the reasons for doing it.

First there was three weeks training, which were to say the least a nightmare, very intense training which was not physically difficult but mentally, because suddenly you see nothing but lots and lots of uniforms and guns and they tell you that everyone is the enemy. They do not brainwash but they try to make the new women soldiers - who will probably all end up being secretaries - think that they are doing something extremely important that will save the country, and of course that is not so.

It was very depressing to see young people having to do that; it was very sad for me that I had to do that and that all of my friends have to do it.

You see, the actual job I was asked to perform was not so difficult, it was just very boring, and *that* was difficult.

I was a head secretary in the legislation and legal department in the headquarters of the IDF advocate offices (which are based in Tel Aviv), and was in charge of five junior secretaries. My commander was a woman, and she was very nice; all the other officers were lawyers, not combat soldiers, and they also were very nice; we were friends and they hated the army as much as me, and in some cases even more.

Being in the army, and especially where I was, I got to see a lot of injustice.

I got to see how very important decisions are being made, how the "laws" of the army are being made, and I saw a lot of helpless soldiers and stupid and ignorant people in key positions and I saw that it was wrong.

Besides that there is also the fact that as a soldier you are denied some of your basic rights. I was lucky enough to serve where I did, but not many people are.

Even though my army service was physically very easy, it put me in a very unfamiliar situation, which at times was very difficult. It was, thinking back, very difficult to live by rules that not only I had nothing to do with but which were also very hard to understand. Before I joined the army I tried to understand why such a system needs the harsh rules and undemocratic ways in which it operates and how I could fit in. Thinking about the undemocratic ways of the army did not evolve from the desire to turn it into an open school. It was trying to find a way in which I could remain true to myself in an environment which demanded that I should change into a completely different person. The fact that I understood exactly why I was doing it, why it is obligatory in Israel, why it was so important to my family that I should do it, etc., led me to the realisation of the things I would not do in order to fit in, and what I was ready to compromise in order to complete my service.

In the hard times during the service, each time the question "Why?" upset my mind I had myself to answer to. I never had anyone else to blame for it. Having spent four years of my youth in a democratic school where I constantly had to make my plans, reach my own decisions, enjoy my good choices and confront my mistakes, had given me the tools which were ready

for use in a situation that was very difficult and different and yet one that I had chosen.

For me it had been a very tough question, whether to serve in the army or not, but once I decided to do it, I did it without expecting anything; the army (any army) is to protect, not educate. When I was at a conventional school before I went to Hadera I was not expecting to have to fight for my rights. The "war" I had to fight all the time produced in me hate and fear. When I went to the army I knew I was going to a different and difficult situation in which I would have to do boring and at times unpleasant things, but that institution is an ARMY, not a school for children who need space to become the people they are. I was ready for it, I gave it a lot of thought, decided what my boundaries were and made sure, all the time, that nothing and no one would hurt me.

As a teenager it had taken me a lot of time to understand that adults are human beings because until I came to the democratic school they were my enemies and I was theirs. (I was considered a good student).

To some people, situations less extreme than the army can be very traumatic, for example, an ordinary school where support is expected and in most cases not given (I can testify for mine). Hadera has not only healed the wounds inflicted by the ordinary system with the love and support it offered, but has also given me the opportunity and the tools to think about and to understand the things I am doing, and not just to do them because someone tells me to.

Yakov Hecht is preparing a book about the school, with interviews with children who have stayed to eighteen, children who have left early, satisfied parents, dissatisfied parents, teachers who love the school, teachers who have been sacked, all kinds of people. He says you will read one chapter and think it is the best school in the world and read another and think it is the worst. This is not only extraordinarily honest, since teachers as a profession are sadly given to boasting about their successes and concealing their mistakes, but it is also extraordinarily confident. There is no doubt at all in my mind that this confidence is justified.



14 Sands School

Two quotations from students:

Sands School is different because of the way it is run. Problems are solved by being brought to the School Meeting. The pupils discuss the issues and make decisions about how the school is organised.

Everybody has a right to their own point of view and this can lead to many disputes. In spite of this, the issues are always worked out. If something doesn't work you can always change it.

I like people to argue and discuss in this way because it is fair. All the people at Sands School can be who they want to be. We don't get pushed into being something just because it's really cool. We are all part of the community. There are no closed groups, everyone has equal rights to talk and bring across their own opinions.

Hetty Holborne

Sands School means a lot to me; mainly it means enjoying education and no longer thinking of it as "compulsory torture". I used to wake up in the morning and say to myself "Damn! I have to go to school again today ..." But now that I'm at Sands I'll wake up on a Monday morning and say, to whoever wishes to hear, "Yes! Another week of school ahead! Yes!" I really enjoy being there.

Tom Currant

By now there is a familiar ring about these quotations. A share in decision-making, a right to sincerity and a relief at escaping from conventional education have been mentioned many times. What is to be gained by describing them again?

The answer is not only that this is the school I know best because I was one of its founders, I taught there for five years and now I take the chair at governors' meetings. It is also because I learnt a particular lesson there that has not been explicit in what I have written about any other school, though I believe it is implicit in the practice of some of them. It is seldom understood, in spite of its obvious reasonableness. It was probably the most important lesson of my teaching life.

Sands was founded immediately after the closure of Dartington Hall School. It continued with the education of the dozen or so young local teenagers who had been left with no compatible school in which to complete their school years, but that was not the only reason for its existence.

The Trustees of Dartington believed that their school had failed, and wanted it to be totally forgotten. We, the founders of Sands thought that the Trustees had betrayed their trust, and we were determined to start a new school based on what we had learnt at Dartington. Dartington Hall School had been closed by people who seldom spent any time in the school and did not understand it. They were eager to believe that everything that went wrong was a direct consequence of the school's approach; they failed to see that things go wrong everywhere, and that what distinguished Dartington was the better way problems were handled. Maurice Ash, the chairman of the Trust, had written that schools like Dartington were "an insignificant backwater: protected, precious, unreal; no longer the vanguard to achievement, but rather a curiosity, something apart" (see the chapter on Dartington). Many of the teachers believed it when they were told that there was no longer much to distinguish Dartington from any conventional school. It was the children who understood, who knew what they had suffered at other schools, and how much better Dartington was. When the decision was taken to close the school, the children were not consulted.

Sands was a result of consultation from the very beginning. During the last term of Dartington Hall School and the summer holidays that followed, staff and students met to discuss what sort of school they wanted. One of our major concerns was that it should be impossible for any faction to take control of the school, whether as governors, staff, parents or students. The school - that is to say the community of students and staff - was to be entirely in charge of its own existence; the mechanism for achieving this was to be the school meeting, where all staff and students would have one vote each.

Sands was founded in 1987, by fourteen children and three teachers who had been at Dartington Hall School until it closed and half a dozen children from elsewhere. The first two terms were spent in the ground floor of the home of one of the students, but then Sands bought its own premises, a dignified old house in Ashburton, a small country town halfway between Exeter and Plymouth. The building has seven main rooms, large by the standards of a house but small by the standards of a school, and a number of smaller rooms. There is a two acre garden with out-buildings which have been converted into the art-room, the woodwork room, the science laboratory, a climbing wall and a chicken shed. There is an astroturf tennis court which is also used as a games pitch.

Sands is a day school for young people from ten to eighteen or so. By January 1996 it had grown to forty-eight students, and the equivalent of five full-time staff, a mixture of full-timers and part-timers.

The timetable offers all the basic school subjects and a few less conventional ones from time to time: Japanese, for example; reflexology; t'ai chi; and role-playing games. When the school started, the students decided

that lessons were to be compulsory, and that the timetable was to be divided into conventional forty-minute slots. This has changed over the years. Now you don't have to go to lessons if you don't want to, but still almost everyone does, and most want to take at least a few GCSE exams. Those who stay on after sixteen usually have their eye on higher examinations.

The teachers' days are packed with lessons, but most students choose to have a few uncommitted periods each week, and some have several every day. Some of these free periods will be filled with cooking, sport, art, woodwork, English, music or other activities that might pass as conventional school subjects; others may be spent talking, playing, watching a video or buying snacks from the shop across the road.

The school meeting is all-powerful. Its authority extends, for instance, to the appointment or dismissal of staff and the admission or expulsion of students. All students and staff have the right to take part, and usually about three quarters of the school do so; parents and visitors may attend by invitation. Some responsibilities are delegated; the financial business of the school, for instance, is run by one of the staff, but even in this area the school meeting is asked to confirm any new developments.

When the school started, I was the head-teacher, but it soon became clear that I was not expected to take any of the decisions a head would normally take. The title was changed; the school now has an administrator, whose duties are to see that all necessary decisions are taken, usually by the school meeting, and to ensure that those decisions are put into effect.

The meeting has hardly made any rules. People are expected to help tidy and clean in the evenings, but that is not so much a rule as a necessity, as there are no domestic staff. The only real rules are that no drugs or alcohol are allowed in the school, you may only smoke in the summerhouse or at the bottom of the garden, and if you go out during the day you should tell a member of staff. There are generally no punishments, but anyone who breaks the drugs rule or persistently upsets other people may, after much discussion in the school meeting, be suspended or expelled. Gardening and simple repairs are done by the students, parents and staff; students and sometimes staff also cook the midday meal.

I have listed these facts as dispassionately as possible. However, it is not the structure of the school that matters, it is the atmosphere. When I visit, I feel an openness, a warmth, a confidence that seems to infect most of the students within quite a short time of their arrival in the school. Sometimes when I return home after a short visit I feel as if I am only a fictional creature returning into the mists of fantasy after having been granted a brief spell on earth as a real human being. The intensity of life in young people who are allowed to be themselves is so powerful that it makes my present sexagenarian existence, occupied with authorship and domesticity, seem utterly trivial.

The students' comments come from three sources: pieces written by Hetty Holborne, Tom Currant, Matt Williams and Chloe Duff; interviews with Amelia Ward, Leonie Bernard, Laurel Sills, Tom Currant and Jason Huggins; and a conversation between Olivia Croce, Bonnie Hill and Matt Williams, recorded by Pat Hill and published in full in Mary John's book, *Children in Charge: The Child's Right to a Fair Hearing*.

Jason: It's the feeling. Because when you come into Sands you get a feeling that you're more part of a family or community, rather than just a bunch of kids who go to the school to learn. In an ordinary school you go in and you just feel you're a number or a letter in a class, and there's no special attention given to you unless you have special needs. But then I don't know because I didn't have any special needs. But basically it treats you more equally and it's a lot better than an ordinary school. It feels a lot better.

Tom: Why did I come to Sands? Well, I found out about it quite literally by seeing an ad in the paper. At the time I was very unhappy at the school I was at and I was having a pretty miserable time of life, and first of all my mum came and looked round and said "Yes, it's really nice, it's a really tatty place, you know, a nice atmosphere," and I thought "OK, I'll go and have a look." So I came here for what's called a trial day - it was two days, a Tuesday and a Wednesday, it was - and I loved it, and have done ever since, really.

Me: What was wrong with your last school?

Tom: What wasn't? I had too much pressure to work, academically, too much academic pressure, but mainly - um - I was being bullied.

Me: Who by?

Tom: By people in my year. I mean not physically kind of bullied, but I was facing a lot of rejection. I could see no reason for it. And there was no one incident, thing that I'd said, or anything I'd done that I could see would have caused it.

I took this problem to my parents, who, especially at that time, were very understanding and sympathetic. I owe them a lot. My parents took this problem to my "head of year" who talked to those pupils concerned. He then sent for me and told me that it was just me being "hypersensitive" and "over-reactive" to the situation. He turned the whole thing around and made out that I was the one in the wrong, and that I was just "attention-seeking"!

This *really* upset me and made me feel very angry, cheated and rejected.

I wanted out.

My parents were equally outraged. It was them, in fact, who suggested that I leave and try to find a new school. At first I wasn't so keen on the idea - it would have meant taking the easy way out, running away. And it was, and it worked ...

Ordinary schools require conformity and obedience. As Tom's story illustrates, teachers often have little time or inclination to listen to their

students. Tom was not the only Sands student to have complaints about a previous school.

Leonie: I've been to lots and lots of schools. [A list of primary schools] And at the last one I just got bullied, and I said "I'm not going to be bullied at my last year at primary school" so I thought "Sands sounds really good," so I came, and I got voted in. I liked the whole idea of the way it works, and the whole idea of the pupils having the same, you know, thing as the teachers, that the teachers aren't higher in any way, shape or form, and it was better than any other school.

Me: Why didn't you like [your old school]?

Laurel: Oh, it was horrible. There was a horrible sense of control there. They sort of mixed up discipline with slave-driving. It was horrible.

Me: Can you think of something that was particularly horrible?

Laurel: Well, it's not a big thing, but there was a boy who had his tie loose, and he got a detention for it. I thought that was terrible. And me and my friend Hannah were laughing all the time, and we nearly got a detention for laughing. I just thought it was a bit stupid, really.

Me: Why did you come here in the first place?

Jason: Mainly because I was bullied at my old school. And it got to the stage where I really didn't want to go to school any more.

What they found at Sands had a number of different advantages.

Olivia: Now from going to Sands I feel my own particular Secondary School rules out your self-originality, your own 'you' and that is a real shame because the kids who are missing out will only find out later about themselves, later in their lives. One thing I really like is that there are so many completely different people at Sands. There are lots of different sorts of people at state school too, but it's hard to find that out. ... You don't get to know so much about the ones outside your immediate circle of friends. There is a good balance and a range of experience of life, and we get to know about it. You get more chance to find out about other people's problems.

Bonnie: I would say that the learning we do at Sands is more enjoyable than at other schools because of having choice to go to lessons or not. Some lessons are more fun than others, not because the teacher 'makes' them fun; it comes partly from the kids - the lessons are what they make them. But if you have chosen to do exams (which practically all of the older students have) you have to do boring things as well. The major part of Sands for me is to do with learning how to be with other people, how to work things out. Although I'm 16, I have chosen not to do GCSEs this year; for me Sands is

not just about passing exams - if that was what I wanted I would go to F.E. college.

Laurel: It's a lot better at Sands. I mean at my old school everyone sort of felt like "Oooh, I just broke the rules, earlier on, that's really fun," but at Sands, because there aren't many rules at all, it's like when you have so much freedom that you don't feel you have to break the rules to have fun or anything. It's really good.

Amelia: You have to grow up because you have to look after yourself and organise yourself and learn how to get on with people and learn how to handle conflict with other people. You have to learn how the school works, how decisions are made. If you are too used to being told what to do, you find it difficult to cope. You get into trouble because you don't know how to handle the freedom. If you come from a strict school, if you get the chance not to do something, you skip it.

This is not to say that Sands is a place of continuous happiness. During a recent visit that had, as usual, left me with a sense of urgent reality that made my adult interests seem like play, I saw two young people in tears, weeping in the arms of members of staff. Both these scenes involved trouble at home: one was the direct consequence of what was happening in the family; and the other was the result of aggression from someone whose anger stemmed from a crisis at home. The discretion, the concern and the respect shown by the other children was admirable. The time and total attention given by the staff members involved was admirable. The trust shown by the distressed young people was admirable. The situations were disturbing, but the typical reactions at the school were - the word is difficult to find - not perfect, not inspiring, but somehow appropriate, realistic, honest, genuine, true to undamaged human nature. Bonnie describes this aspect of the school less pretentiously than I do.

Bonnie: Most of the time the atmosphere at the school is good, but sometimes it's horrible and stressful. I think this is OK because in school meetings and at other times we can look at what is causing the stress and what we can do to make the situation less stressful. It helps us to learn to deal with situations which are stressful. Some students think the school is ideal, but I don't, and I don't think it should be or can be.

What is extraordinary about the schools I have described in this book is not that any of them have found perfect solutions to any problems. It is that in any situation they genuinely seek to find the best solution possible. What is extraordinary about the conventional world is that, in any situation, society tends only to seek the solution that will least disturb the status quo. As people grow older they tend to value the status quo above what they have learnt to

deride as romantic ideals. When we were young we saw those romantic ideals as realistic objectives. Sands, along with all the rest, provides evidence that we were right. It is not romantic to be concerned about people's distress, to trust others, to believe that the world can be made into a better place.

Elizabeth Hurlock, a psychologist who has written extensively about childhood and adolescence, has identified a type that she calls "adolescent reformers". She finds them irritating, because they try to persuade the rest of the world to fall in line with their own convictions - to become vegetarian, to support nuclear disarmament, to oppose road-building or whatever it may be - and she therefore brands them as immature. She seems to think that maturity only comes when you abandon your ideals, that maturity means accepting the values of society.

I don't know what she would make of Sands students' attitudes to their school meeting. The following discussion seems to me to demonstrate a maturity that still leaves room for idealism. The students show a realistic understanding of the problems, combined with a fundamental desire to find ideal solutions.

Matt: The meeting is very important because it is the other thing [besides freedom of speech - see below] that gives the school its great feeling of equality. In Sands, the meeting has the ultimate say in any matter involving the school. Before the meeting, the chair (who is a pupil elected at the beginning of each term) makes an agenda by going round the school and asking if anybody has anything they want discussed. If you want something put on the agenda you just ask the chair to put it on. In the meeting, all the points are discussed in an order decided by the chair and then voted on. Everybody has one vote. It doesn't usually run as smoothly and as clinically as this. I think this is a good thing because I dislike ordering discussions, and it means that meetings are more enjoyable.

Bonnie: When I first went to the school a year ago I used to think I wouldn't say anything because I would get attacked by others. Now I have started saying things; some of them are controversial and I get shouted down, but I still say them because I don't care what other people think now. This takes a long time, but I think it is a good thing to learn to do.

Olivia: Unfortunately once you have said what you think, the majority of people there won't hear it. They will still be with the thing the louder and more powerful person has said before you.

Bonnie: The good thing, though, is that I find the meetings less intimidating now, and feel better when I've said what I think even if it is shouted down.

Matt: That is a problem for the chair.

Olivia: Some kids are shy and scared to say how they feel and what they would like to see being done about the matter being discussed. It is very

difficult when this happens because the problem becomes heavier to handle for both the students and the teachers.

If students are confident of the meeting, they can use it; but if they are not confident in the process they can't. Most of the organisational decisions are straightforward, like how to spend money, etc. Others are more difficult, like a decision we had to make recently about suspending or expelling some students who had broken the rule about drugs at school. We spent hours in this meeting and it was so stressful. In the end, the vote was to suspend them for a week; we didn't just say you broke the rule so you must go, but listened to everyone's views and decided they should be given a second chance. Sometimes the students are more sensitive than the teachers, sometimes vice versa, or there can be a mix. Some of the students, and probably all of the teachers, think that the well-being of the school and its image are the most important thing; others, usually the students, think that the problems of students who are being disruptive or breaking rules are the priority to discuss in meetings. So sometimes we have two camps of people, and after a difficult meeting everyone is exhausted, but it is important to have all points of view heard and thoroughly discussed if a decision is going to affect someone's life. Like a pupil or teacher being kicked out of the school. It's usually the kinder people who win on those issues, not the hard-liners who try to shout you down.

By its very existence, Sands questions conventional values, and its students, adolescent reformers as they may well be, have the chance to hang on to their ideals. Young people tend to have higher moral standards than their elders. As Olivia observes, it is mostly the adults at Sands who think the image of the school is more important than the students' problems.

A system which encourages open discussion obviously helps children to learn more about social relationships than a system that imposes unquestioning discipline. However, some people value scholastic achievements more highly than social skills, and assume that because Sands allows freedom of choice, no students will actually learn anything that will help them towards academic qualifications. Leonie's previous head teacher seemed to share this view.

Leonie: [My headmaster] was like sort of talking to me and he went "Which secondary school are you thinking of going to?" I went "Sands." "But you can't, you're too bright!" You know, like when I'm bright it's a bit more ... He went "But South Dartmoor's better." "But I don't think so, I like the idea of the school. Self-motivation and things like that." He went "Ooooooh." He was sort of - completely disagreed with the idea, and in fact everybody else in my class did.

It is often believed, presumably because children with educational problems often do better in schools like Sands, that those are the only children such schools are appropriate for. The continuation of my conversation with Leonie, and the remarks from others that follow it, show that this is quite untrue.

Me: Do you feel that you are much brighter than anyone else in your group?

Leonie: In Y-group now? No!! (Laughs) I'm the youngest. In the whole school. It's a bit sort of - funny.

Me: Do you want to do lots of exams, or not?

Leonie: Yeah. I do, because I want to be a juvenile lawyer.

Me: You'll need lots of exams to do that.

Leonie: Yeah. Loads and loads of GCSEs and things.

Me: You were doing well at your last school, weren't you? You'd got a B in Drama already.

Tom: Oh yeah, yeah, I've got a B in drama already, but Vicky says that I'm quite capable of getting an A. I may do it here as well. I don't know if it's allowed to do it twice in one year, but ...

Me: Do you do a lot of work here?

Tom: I go to all my lessons.

Me: What subjects do you do?

Tom: I'm doing five I'm taking this year and two more that I'll take next year. And then I'm doing one more out of school, which I'm going to take this year. Music, with Julian.

Me: Does school work matter to you?

Tom: Yeah. School work matters to me. To be honest [laughs] I don't entirely know why. But I guess it's important to me, one way and another.

Me: What do you want to do when you leave school?

Tom: I'd quite like to become a teacher.

Me: When you're coming to school in the morning, what things do you look forward to?

Amelia: Seeing my friends. Lessons are quite good, and I like projects. In art I'm doing painting and so - it's nice, because putting the frame on and painting and that's good fun. And I enjoy doing that.

Me: Do you spend most of your time in school in lessons? Or do you spend more time with your friends?

Amelia: I suppose most of the time in lessons. But there is time - break and lunch - time where I'm with my friends, and occasionally I have free periods.

Me: You don't have a lot of them?

Amelia: No, 'cause most of my free periods I've got extra English, so ... But that's fine. Because I get bored sometimes if I have too many free periods.

Me: What lessons are you doing at the moment?

Jason: This year I'm doing GCSE Literature, GCSE Psychology, AS Level Sociology and AS Level Maths.

Me: What are you going to do next year?

Jason: Hopefully, join the RAF. In August, hopefully.

Bonnie: The point is, you have a choice about whether to do academic work or not. No pressure is put on you to do as many GCSEs as possible. There is no competition around academic work. If someone works hard and does well, I feel pleased for them, but if you don't do well, you don't feel like a failure. If a student wants to do well academically they will work, but if they don't, any number of lessons won't motivate them to work. The timetable is completely full of lessons because that was voted on by the majority of students. That is a democratic decision made before I came here. If we had a vote on it now I would vote for more free time. If we particularly want to do something which is not on the timetable or which the teachers at the school can't do, it is up to us to ask for it and the teachers will do their best to provide it.

Olivia: There should be more time-tabling for free time. The teachers have meetings on how to organise the timetable, but I think the students should be involved in that too. Each student should write in how much time they would like in each subject.

Matt: I think the academic side of Sands is very good at motivating me to do work. The ideology of self-motivation only works for about half the people and the rest of us have a counter-philosophy which is about wanting to learn but relying for motivation on enjoying being in lessons with people you like being with, who are the teachers. I don't enjoy the idea of having to get everything together for myself, because it means I don't have as much time for sitting around and talking to people and moving around and socialising. The atmosphere in the lessons is similar to the rest of the time at Sands, so I only know where the academic work begins and ends because of the timetabled structure.

Although there is always much discussion of people's behaviour, there is seldom any feeling of heavy philosophising; Sands is generally an extremely happy place, and is characterised more by smiles and laughter than by earnestness. Usually after I have visited, I return home with a sensation of having been at a really good party, where I have seen a great many friends I am extremely fond of. That is all the more exhilarating because of the age of so many of these friends. In spite of the fact that I am over sixty, the values that underlie our jokes and discussions are shared values, and this is just as momentarily significant as the sharing of values between free schools in Europe and free schools in India or Japan.

The wonder of Sands is not that nothing goes wrong. Even if the school itself were in some way miraculously perfect, because in such an active environment, with new students arriving each year and so many problems in the world outside, things would obviously go wrong, the wonder of Sands is the way in which difficulties are faced and discussed and dealt with.

The essence of the school is elusive, and perhaps no two people associated with the school would pick on exactly the same characteristics. Matt and Jason have been in the school for a long time, so their opinions are particularly relevant.

Matt: The most important reason for me liking Sands is the atmosphere. The general feeling in the school is one of understanding. Because the school is so small everybody knows each other really well. This doesn't mean that everyone will take to everyone else on a day-to-day basis because naturally people will hang out with the people they like most. Sands is just a place where this can happen. For instance, if you've got somebody who is friends with somebody else from a completely different age group, they can still hang around together even if they do none of the same lessons. I know this isn't something that is forbidden in an ordinary school, but it tends not to happen because of the taboos that keep different age groups apart.

The other main thing I love about Sands is the freedom of speech everybody has and the equality that this helps bring about. Anybody can speak to anybody else about anything. There are of course certain things you wouldn't want to say to certain people. This also means that the gap between teachers and pupils is obviously much smaller than it is in any other school. There is still a difference between adults and children. This is because an adult has far more experience of most things than virtually any child. On the other hand, because there are far more kids than grown-ups and children are quite often more inventive than some adults, most new ideas come from the kids.

Me: How long have you been here?

Jason: Calendar-wise I've been here eight years. School-wise about seven years three months. Quite some time.

Me: Has it changed a lot?

Jason: Sure. Dramatically, I think. The school in general hasn't changed. People's attitudes, and attitudes within the school have changed, dramatically, over the last eight years.

Me: In what sorts of way?

Jason: I don't know, actually, it's just people's care, really, about the school. It seems to be if there's a caring top group, so the O1 or the sixth form, is a strong, caring group, then the school tends to be positive, but if the O1 are a less together group and less - they don't care for the school in a way, just get on with their stuff and then leave, it tends to fall apart quite a bit.

Me: Having been here so long, do you think you understand the school better than a lot of other people do?

Jason: I don't know. It tends to change, the understanding of what - or what the school is for the people who are in it. So I understood the school. But now it's changed again because there's a different top group and there's a different lower group. The idea of the school has changed once again, but

I've now got to get back into how they believe the school is, so I see it from their point of view as well as mine.

Me: Do the children in the school make more difference than the teachers?

Jason: Definitely. I think the teachers are like myself. They get to know how the kids in the school relate to it, in order to come from their standpoint, rather than teachers trying to push their stuff on to the kids. They have to get to know the kids' ideas and so forth.

When I re-read all this, I was struck by the fact that, when talking about the general character of the school, none of the students felt it was necessary to mention any individual teachers by name. It seems that the school really does have an existence independent of the adults it employs. Jason specifically says that the teachers "get to know how the kids in the school relate to it, in order to come from their standpoint, rather than teachers trying to push their stuff on to the kids." Matt comments that "most new ideas come from the kids."

When the school started, the students were more traditional than the staff, and they decided not only on the full timetable that Bonnie and Olivia object to, but also that that timetable should be compulsory. It was a student, though, who formulated the dictum "Common sense takes the place of rules." Lessons are no longer compulsory, but rules threaten to multiply.

It is a common adult belief that there is an inevitable conflict between the interests of adults and children, and that to share decision-making with children is to surrender to them. However, where there is genuine equality it becomes obvious that no such conflict exists, so there can be no question of victory or surrender. What is needed is simply co-operation. If you only listen to idealists, you lose touch with practicalities; if you only listen to experience, you make no changes. At school meetings at Sands there is an honest attempt to listen to both.

When the school started, I thought there were probably some areas in which sharing decision-making with children would be inappropriate, but within five years I was certain that there were none. Adults have knowledge and experience which can be shared with the young, but children have imagination, openness, empathy, idealism and many other faculties that decline with age. When the school started, I thought reasons for valuing the school meeting were that it taught young people about democracy in a practical way, and made it more likely that the school would run smoothly because the children themselves had decided on the mechanism. Both reasons are right, but a far more important one is that children and staff deliberating honestly together make better decisions than either staff or children could make on their own.

The lesson I learnt at Sands is now so obvious to me that I can hardly believe it needs repeating, but I have clear evidence that, when the school started, I did not understand it myself. In an early prospectus I wrote:

Children who are trusted will become trustworthy.
Children who are respected will learn a proper self-respect.
Children who are cared for will learn to care for others.

At the time I thought I had summed up the whole rationale of the school. What I have now learnt is that the statements were an insult to childhood. This is the true state of affairs:

Children are trustworthy unless they have not been trusted.
Children have a proper self-respect as long as others have respected them.
Children care for others unless they have not been cared for themselves.

At Sands, children are not trusted, respected and cared for in order to achieve some objective; they are trusted, respected and cared for because that is the treatment they deserve.

I shall end this chapter with a complete piece by Chloe, which illustrates a number of the themes of this chapter.

This story begins when I left Barchester Community College [not its real name] to go to Sands School. We heard about Sands from a lady my Mum knows. We liked the sound of it, and because I hated Barchester so much we decided to try it out.

When I told my friends at Barchester that I was leaving to go to Sands, some of them just said "Oh, I've heard of that place," and smiled in a sort of sarcastic way, but one boy said "Oh, isn't that where all the thick people go?" I just tried to explain to them that Sands was a good school, but I don't think they really wanted to listen, but just a few days later I left Barchester to go to Sands anyway.

I kept in contact with some of my old friends and had quite a few debates with them about it because some of them just had it in their heads that Sands was a bad school. I wanted them to listen to me and give me a chance to tell them all about it, as it really is a good school. Some of them lied about having been there before, to try and make out they had seen it was bad. But after a while it was all forgotten and I didn't really see any of them except for occasionally passing in the street. I forgot about it and made lots of new friends.

Then it all started again when my younger brother came home from school and said that some of my old friends' younger brothers and sisters had been going on at him about me and my sister's school. I couldn't believe it and I

just told my brother to tell these people to mind their own business. This also passed over, kind of, but it still happens, so I guess I just got used to it.

Then I decided to go to auditions for the local pantomime. I met up with lots of old so-called friends. They didn't really bring up my school except for saying "How is school?" But one rehearsal I made a big mistake. I was in the dressing-room trying on a dress. When I came out I got talking to some of the younger kids about just stuff and it led to talking about my school. Then every time I saw them they picked debates with me. I really wanted to do something drastic, because as well as being really irritating it was ruining the fun I would have had during the pantomime. So I decided to have a revolution. I wanted to go on TV and try to get through to them to mind their own business because I was tired of having to debate with them. I decided I wanted to go on a TV show called "Wise up", which was a programme where kids get to voice their views.

I wrote the letter and got all sorted to do it but never got round to sending it off. I told everyone I was having a revolution and then I realised I wanted loads of revolutions all about different things, in fact I wanted to change the world. I was really enthusiastic at first but then the pantomime ended and I just thought they weren't really worth it.

It still annoys me when I think about them and that they ruined my fun in the pantomime but they're just unlucky that they don't go and have the enjoyment I do of Sands.

Maybe they were just jealous.

Chloe hated her conventional school. She moved to Sands and liked it. The outside world showed the usual prejudice, refused to listen to the truth, claimed inside knowledge it did not have and tried to destroy her confidence in the school. Nevertheless she held on to her ideals. This led her to realise that there were more things wrong in society than just conventional education.

She's right. We will have to change the world.

Conclusion

I still don't know what the ideal school would be like, but I hope it is now plain that the questions most commonly asked are the wrong ones.

"How can we make children learn more?" ask the ambitious. But children learn all the time, in play, in creative activities, in conversation, from books, television and films and from the world around them. Schools that try too hard to teach run a risk of turning children off from learning altogether.

"How can we teach children the difference between right and wrong?" ask the conscientious. But children know the difference between right and wrong, and when they are allowed to take responsibility for their own lives they want to make sure that they and others are cared for and protected.

"How can we improve school discipline?" ask the conventional. But most social and academic problems are eased and many are solved, not by discipline, but by respect, responsibility, affection and freedom.

"How can we train children to think?" ask the intellectuals. As students from school after school have explicitly stated in this book, children who are allowed to organize their own lives learn to think for themselves.

However, the variety of approaches in the schools described in this book has raised more questions than it has answered.

How can children best deal with transgressions in the social life of the school: through small meetings, as at Tamariki; or a legal system and a Justice Committee, as at Sudbury Valley; or a full school meeting as at Summerhill?

Is it more important to start reform with the poorest of the poor, as at Sumavanam and Neel Bagh, or with the children with the worst problems, as at the Kleingruppe Lufingen, or is it better first to demonstrate success with carefully selected children, as at Mirambika?

Should school attendance be voluntary, as at Tokyo Shure?

If school is compulsory, should there be compulsory lessons, as in the middle school at Dartington Hall, or voluntary lessons, as at Hadera, or no lessons, as at Sudbury Valley?

Should children share responsibility for everything that happens at the school, as at Sands, or only for their own social world, as at Summerhill, or only for their own personal decisions within a prepared environment, as at the Pesta?

How far is it possible to care for children with problems without damaging the opportunities for others? Was it an over-optimistic answer to this question that sealed the fate of the Barbara Taylor School?

Should children live all the time with their families, as at Bramblewood, where there is no distinction between term-time and holiday time, or should they be protected from their parents at boarding schools like Summerhill?

Should children be helped to find their own interests by being offered many stimuli and opportunities, as at Countesthorpe, Tamariki and the Kleingruppe Lufingen, or should they be allowed to wait until their interest arises naturally, as at Sudbury Valley?

Are the teachers at Hadera right to worry that a school timetable implies that only those things that are timetabled are worth studying, and so devalues any other interests children may have?

Is it important to help children to prepare for exams, as at Sands and Dartington, or is it better to allow them to enjoy their childhood without anxiety, as at the Pesta, and only to turn to the examination system if they want qualifications after leaving school?

Is it true, as Sri Aurobindo said at Mirambika, that nothing can be taught? If so, what are teachers to do?

The number of schools that are like the ones I have described is growing all the time. Tokyo Shure has had to open two new branches. A dozen new schools in the US, Canada and Australia have modelled themselves on Sudbury Valley. At the end of this book there is a list of some of the schools and groups of schools that have similar ideals, and it is far from complete.

The answers in this book are not the only answers. The Puget Sound Community School, in the state of Washington, has no premises, and meets by arrangement in different places at different times. Moo Ban Dek, in Thailand, which cares for a hundred and fifty abused children from the slums of Bangkok, combines Summerhill ideas with Buddhist philosophy. The night schools of Rajasthan, in northern India, elect a children's parliament which has real power in the locality; it deals not only with education but also, among other things, drinking water, health, agriculture, energy, industry and women's development.

In many countries there are governments that are beginning to understand. Countesthorpe and the Kleingruppe Lufingen were state schools, and Hadera is a state school. Hadera is being asked to help with the democratisation of other schools. Tamariki started as an independent school but is now supported by the state. In Denmark, any school that can show a reasonable demand for places is subsidised by the government to the tune of roughly £3000 per pupil, which is enough to cover about 75% of the running costs of schools like the ones I have described.

What is at last being recognised is that for most people it really doesn't matter whether they know how to solve simultaneous equations or who built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon or what purposes are served by a cow's several stomachs. What matters is that school-leavers should be - and I take



the list from my introduction - literate and numerate, of course, but also happy, considerate, honest, enthusiastic, tolerant, self-confident, well-informed, articulate, practical, co-operative, flexible, creative, individual, determined people who know what their talents and interests are, have enjoyed developing them and intend to make good use of them. They should be people who care for others because they have been cared for themselves.

Students leaving schools like the ones in this book are more likely to fit this description than any who have been trained as cogs.

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List of Schools

Australia

- Acrobatic Arts Community School, PO Box 1101, Wodongo 3690, Victoria.
 Brisbane Independent School, 2447 Moggill Road, Kenmore 4069, Queensland.
 Kensington Community High School, 393 Macauley Road, Kensington 3031, Victoria.
 Marbury School, 160 Mount Barker Road, Aldgate 5154, South Australia.
 Sherbrooke Community School, 311 Mount Dandenon Tourist Road, Sassafras 3787, Victoria.

Austria

- There are a score of alternative free schools in Austria, all connected through: Netzwerk, Schweglerstraße 43/4, 1150 Vienna.

Belgium

- De Weide Free School, Sint. Apolloniastraat 11, B-9429 Erpe-mere.

Denmark

- There are so many free schools of various kinds in Denmark that there is no point in listing just a few of them. The most relevant organisations are:
 Dansk Friskoleforening, Princes Havevej 11, DK 5600 Faaborg.
 Frie Grunskolers Fallesraad, Japanvej 36, DK 4200 Slagelse.

Ecuador

- Fundacion Educativa Pestalozzi, Casilla 17/11/6679, Quito.

France

- State Schools:

- Collège Lycée Expérimental, 17 Boulevard René Coty - BP 272, 44606 Saint Nazaire.
 L'école Décroly, 49 Avenue Daumesnil, 94160 Sainte Mande.
 L'école élémentaire Vitruve, 1-3 Passage Josseaume, 75020 Paris.
 Lycée Autogéré de Paris, 393 Rue de Vaugirard, 75015 Paris.
 Lycée Expérimental, 1018 Boulevard du Grand Parc, 14200 Hérouville St. Clair.

Independent Schools:

L'école Jacques Prévert, 32 bis Avenue Carnot, 33200 Bordeaux Cauderan.
 École de la Neville, Château de Tachy, 77650 Chalmaison.
 Thélème, 2 Rue des Chalets, 66820 Vernet les Bains.

Germany

There are 15 free schools that belong to:

Bundesverband der Freien Alternativeschulen, Wiemelhauser Straße, 44799
 Bochum.

Important schools not included in this group are:

Odenwaldschule, 6148 Heppenheim.
 Oberstufenkolleg Bielefeld, Universitätsstraße 23/25, 3365 Bielefeld.

India

Mirambika, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi 110016.
 Sumavanam, Cheegalabailu Post, Madanapalle, Chittoor District, Andhra
 Pradesh.

Israel

The Democratic School of Hadera, Schunat Brandess, Hadera.
 The Meitar School, Kibbutz Beit, Oren 30044.

Japan

Global Free School, 525-3 Imazu-machi, Takasago-cho, Takasago-shi,
 Hyogo-ken.
 Kinokuni Children's Village, 51 Hikotani, Hashimoto City, Wakayama-ken
 648.
 Nonami Kodomo no Mura, 28-3241 Nonami, Tenpaku-cho, Nagoya-shi.
 Tokyo Shure, 1-9-19 Kisimachi, Kita, Tokyo 114.

New Zealand

Tamariki School, 96 St. Johns Street, Christchurch 6.

Palestine

Al Amal, The Hope Flowers School, POB 732, Bethlehem.

Thailand

Moo Ban Dek, c/o Foundation for Children, 666 Charoennakorn Klongsarn,
 Bangkok 10600.

United Kingdom

Galloway Small School, The Lodge, Kilquhanity House, Castle Douglas,
 Kircudbrightshire.
 Park School, Park Road, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EF.
 Sands School, 48 East Street, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7AX.
 Summerhill School, Leiston, Suffolk, IP16 4HY.

USA

Albany Free School, 8 Elm Street, Albany, NY 12202.
 City as School, 16 Clarkson Street, New York 10014.
 Grassroots Free School, 2458 Grassroots Way, Tallahassee, FL 32311.
 Puget Sound Community School, 1715 112th Avenue BE, Bellevue, WA
 98004.
 Second Foundation School, 1219 University Avenue SE, Minneapolis, MN
 55414.
 Sudbury Valley School, 2 Winch Sreet, Framingham, MA 01701.

Sudbury Valley has a list of similar schools on the Internet at
 SudVal@aol.com.

AERO, 417 Roslyn Heights, NY 11577, email jmintz@igc.apc.org, publishes
 a newsletter and the Almanac of Education Choices, giving an enormous range
 of schools and contacts.

Real Education describes schools in Britain, Ecuador, India, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland and the USA. Students vary from the children of carefully selected fee-paying parents to educational rejects and children of families in extreme poverty. Locations include inner city Harlem, an Ashram in Delhi, an office block in Tokyo and an Alpine valley.

The variety is astonishing, yet each of these schools shows that children do better when they are allowed to think for themselves. From an educational point of view it is significant that this theme emerges from so many different cultures.

David Gribble's previous book, *Considering Children*, was described by Michael Young, originator of the Open University, as "the best book about progressive education since A.S. Neill and Curry". Neil Dunn, author of *Up the Junction* and *Steaming*, said "I wish I had had this book before my children went to their very first school. It's fascinating and I loved it."

In **Real Education** David provides evidence that discipline, curriculum and tests are irrelevant to a child's development and that the central issues are care, respect and freedom.

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